

USING THE BIGGER IDEA IN PHILIPPIANS
TO UNDERSTAND THE BIG IDEAS

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To Holly

Grace giver

Best friend

Life partner

Who shares my hopes and enables me to dream.

To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy — to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.

—Jude 24-25 (NIV)

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¹ This figure is repeated on pages 29, 30 and 44.

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ABBREVIATIONS

NASB New American Standard Bible

NIV New International Version

ABSTRACT

Haddon Robinson's Big Idea approach to preaching centers on the meaning of a whole preaching passage. But what is the larger context of the big idea? It is the bigger idea or theme of the book in which the passage is found. This thesis-project provides a preaching series on the book of Philippians. It will be used as a case study to show preachers the value of connecting the ideas of individual passages in a book to the book's bigger idea. Preachers who champion the big idea approach to preaching will find a larger context in which to better understand the big idea.

CHAPTER 1

THE PROBLEM AND ITS SETTING

The Problem to Be Addressed: A Contextual Crisis

Original Intention of the Author

The first step in understanding a biblical passage is to define the intention of its author and to imagine how the original recipients made sense of what was written to them.¹ But most scholars and preachers have not gone far enough in the pursuit of this ideal. Too perfunctorily a movement is made from the original context to one's own. One's understanding of theology, informed by the full canon of Scripture, too easily and quickly takes contemporary readers in directions that were foreign to the people to whom the authors of Scripture wrote.

Also, too many preachers seem to have a greater commitment to their favorite system of theology than to the Bible. Research done by The Francis Schaeffer Institute of Church Leadership Development states, “Sixty-two percent (62%) of pastors said . . . they regularly read into a passage what was not there in order to make their point.”²

¹ “A text *cannot mean what it never meant*. Or to put that in a positive way, the true meaning of the biblical text for us is what God originally intended it to mean when it was first spoken.” Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 26.

² Richard Krejcir, “The Problem of Eisegesis,” <http://www.churchleadership.org/apps/articles/default.asp?articleid=67933&columnid=4624> (accessed November 21, 2011).

Many ideas are imported back into the Scriptures. Even a competent scholar such as Moises Silva says “systematics should influence our exegesis.”³ But when this happens, the original context loses.

Everyone committed to expository preaching is taught that context is king. This might seem to be a simple proposal, but others have observed that it is difficult for the average preacher to stick to such an approach.⁴ Every preacher is exposed to theological materials and church history, as well as many other areas of study, in seminary. How is this integrated into the person’s approach to preaching? In seminary, many approaches about how to understand a passage in the Bible are taught. In this plethora of information, the context of the original author and the original readers seems to be lost. Again, context loses.

Three Interpretive Horizons

For example, Edmund Clowney says that three interpretive horizons must be considered in order to fully understand a passage. These are the immediate context of the book or passage, the context of the period of revelation in which the book or passage falls, and the context of the entirety of revelation. Richard Lints refers to these as the textual horizon, the epochal horizon, and the canonical horizon.⁵ In order to understand the Bible, Lints says, “The theological interpreter of Scripture must allow the three horizons to dialogue with one another continually, helping to explain and clarify the

³ Moises Silva, “The Case for Calvinistic Hermeneutics,” in *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics*, ed. Walter C. Kaiser Jr. and Moises Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 166.

⁴ A typical online thread reads, “We see many preachers or believers interpreting their own meaning to texts; often based on their social adherences or preferences.” See bogomil; a member of AboveTopSecret.com message thread, “Bible Bias–Is God Absolute,” <http://www.belowtopsecret.com/forum/thread726858/pg1#pid11791458> (accessed September 7, 2011).

⁵ Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1993), 293.

meaning of the others.”⁶ Lints entitles his work *The Fabric of Theology*, and he may be correct in his evaluation for systematic theology.

But the preacher must always ask, “What was the context of the original readers or hearers?”⁷ From where they stood, they could not see two of Lints’s three horizons. The idea of several horizons is good, but the original recipients did not enjoy such a luxury. Only readers from a later date can approach Scripture in this way.⁸

The Importance of Addressing the Contextual Problem

Understanding the Larger Context

It is important to have clarity in this matter, for preachers and hearers alike can accurately understand the smaller parts of language only in the larger context in which they are found. Sidney Porter, referring to textual linguistics, writes that discourse analysis focuses not on isolated words or even sentences but on larger units called discourses:

A useful model of discourse analysis works from the analogy of a pyramid. The pyramid is composed of various layers, including word (bottom), phrase, sentence, pericope, and at the top—the whole discourse. It is at this top level that singular topics or thematic structures can be stated and analyzed. Discourse analysis works through all the levels of the

⁶ Lints, *Fabric of Theology*, 293.

⁷ In the ancient world there was “virtually no system of education.” The literacy rate was only about 10 percent, and early Christians were drawn from a multitude of ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. For most of them to *hear* the Scripture, it had to be read to them. See Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 4, 8, et al.

⁸ Similarly, Geerhardus Vos proposes that the meaning of a text is found ultimately in the larger context of the whole of biblical revelation. In regard to the Philippians epistle, this vantage point is the privilege only of theologians living several centuries after the letter was written. See Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 14–18.

pyramid to provide a full analysis. (It is, in a sense, the syntax *beyond the sentence.*)⁹

This insight is confirmed in the big idea approach to preaching: “What a writer means in any specific paragraph or chapter can be determined basically by fitting it into the larger argument of the book. . . . Not only should the passage be placed within the broad unity of the book, but it must also be related to the immediate context.”¹⁰

Benefits of the Larger Context

In addition, combining smaller and larger contexts will protect preachers from SAM,¹¹ for “at the heart of committing SAM is a failure to think in terms of the whole versus parts.”¹²

Further, understanding the larger context opens preachers to more preachable insights. As Haddon Robinson says, “I study the context for flow of thought. I usually get more preachable insights from context than from studying the grammar and word structure of the original language.”¹³

This understanding is needed in the field of homiletics because preachers will discover the specific messages of the author as they understand the big picture. Context, as it is understood at every level, will bring clarity to the message. Preachers will

⁹ Sidney Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 298-99.

¹⁰ Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 58.

¹¹ SAM, a common term in preaching circles, refers to spiritualizing, allegorizing, or moralizing a text.

¹² Randal Pelton and Jeff Carroll, “If You Can’t Spiritualize, Allegorize, or Moralize, What’s a Preacher to Do? Preaching Christ from Gospel Narratives,” *Journal of the Evangelical Homiletics Society* 5, no. 1 (March 2005): 37-38. See also Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 166.

¹³ Haddon W. Robinson and Scott M. Gibson, *Making a Difference in Preaching: Haddon Robinson on Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 98.

understand what the original author was trying to say, and must let the Bible say what it says when it says it.

Paul's Epistle to the Philippians as a Case Study in Context

The Contextual Horizons of the Philippians

Negatively stated, this thesis is a study in contextual crisis. But a positive statement is that Paul's epistle to the Philippians was used as a case study in understanding how the Christians at Philippi understood what was written to them.

In determining the mindset of the original readers or hearers, the contextual horizons must be explained differently. The Philippians had only this letter from Paul. They did not possess his full corpus, for the New Testament had not yet been collected. They had the one epistle and could see the context of its various passages. They were Christians and therefore were familiar with the kerygma, but they could not contextualize their letter from Paul within the themes that were developed in Paul's extensive writings now found in the New Testament. They could relate what Paul had written them to the original preaching of the gospel (kerygma) that they had heard and received. They may have also had a few manuscripts of sections of the Old Testament.¹⁴

This thesis focused the interpretive lens on only what the Philippians could see. The Hebrews had a wide-ranging understanding of the Old Testament. But the composition of the Philippian Church, the first church in Europe, was mainly Greek.

¹⁴ Paul's reference to public reading (1 Timothy 4:13) refers to the reading of the Old Testament, most likely the Septuagint, since members of the churches formed by Paul would not understand Hebrew or Aramaic. How many churches had portions of the Septuagint to read? Certainly no first-century church had a complete codex of the Septuagint. They might have portions of manuscripts left by Paul (see 2 Timothy 4:13) or by other ministers he sent.

When Paul first came to Philippi, he could not find a synagogue nor even a group of Jewish men. He found a group of women (Acts 16:13). Their knowledge of the Bible must have been superficial. Years later when Paul's letter came, they certainly had some foundational teaching from Paul and his team, but we do not know the content with any certainty. So the focus is on what we know they understood. What did this letter mean to them? How did they understand the various pericopes in the light of the bigger idea of the epistle or in the light of the kerygma?

The Approach to the Problem

The focus of this thesis is Paul's epistle to the church at Philippi. The main concern is how the big idea of each passage relates to the bigger idea¹⁵ of the epistle. This writer touched briefly also on the relationship to the biggest idea, that is, the kerygma.¹⁶ The approach to understanding a passage in three contexts can be summed up by this diagram:

Big Idea (passage) —> Bigger Idea (book) —> Biggest Idea (Christ)

Figure 1.1 Three Contextual Horizons

¹⁵ This is the overall theme of the epistle.

¹⁶ The kerygma is the early church's proclamation of the good news about Jesus Christ. As Clark H. Pinnock wrote, "Properly speaking, this *kerygma* is the Gospel in its fullest sense, embracing both fact and teaching (I Peter 1:25). In the earliest years it was largely oral, and gradually received a written form. The *kerygma* was the authority and norm of the first believers, and the New Testament today functions as the standard of apostolic Christianity." For further information, see Clark H. Pinnock, "The Inspiration of the New Testament," chapter 7 in *The Bible: The Living Word of Revelation*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1968), 149. See also 1 Corinthians 15:3-6 for an early summary of the kerygma.

The Ministry Setting in Which the Thesis Was Tested

This writer instructed a small group on how to adopt the mindset of the church at Philippi. This involved a journey through time. The group stood in the place of these early believers. The New Testament has not been gathered, so they know nothing about the rest of Paul's writings. They may or may not have portions of the Septuagint in their congregation. What do they have? When they read a passage, they can see its immediate context. They have the entire letter from Paul as a larger context. And they are Christians who have heard and received the kerygma (i.e., Christ-centered preaching).

Each time that the group gathered, the thesis writer reminded members of this context in which to understand the various pericopes. He also provided feedback forms to ascertain how these three spheres of interpretive context influence one another.¹⁷ The group met once a week for eight weeks. In the first week, members of the small group were introduced to the bigger idea of the letter to the Philippians. During the following seven weeks, the thesis writer and the group dealt with one pericope each week.

The Framework for This Project

Chapter 1 explains a crisis of context in evangelical preaching. Too often a preacher's theological preferences or favorite ideas are read back into the original text. A new way to view contextual horizons is offered to preachers to help avoid this mistake. One of these horizons is the bigger idea or theme of a book of the Bible. This will be the main focus of this thesis.

¹⁷ The big idea of the passage, the bigger idea of the epistle, and the biggest idea—the good news about Jesus and his kingdom.

Chapter 2 examines the theological setting of the bigger idea. The bigger idea of the epistle to the Philippians is identified in this chapter. Also four dynamics are introduced to help pastors evaluate how the bigger idea influences the big ideas.

Chapter 3 is a literature review that includes books on preaching and commentaries on Philippians. The concept of the bigger idea is traced through these writings and the opinions of the writers are contrasted. This will give preachers an overview of the bigger idea and the biggest idea as well as a general summary of how commentators understand the book of Philippians.

Chapter 4 is designed to instruct a preacher how to present a book of the Bible using its bigger idea as an informative context for the book's big ideas. To accomplish this the book of Philippians was presented as a case study. Each pericope was reviewed and its big idea defined.¹⁸ The dynamics involved in relating the big idea to the bigger idea and the kerygma were applied and explained. In this process, the big idea always had the greatest weight as the author considered how these interpretive horizons influenced one another.¹⁹

Chapter 5 evaluates the feedback from the small group who studied the book of Philippians. In this chapter a preacher can see first hand how helpful the concept of the bigger idea was to this group. The author describes the process, states conclusions, and identifies future possibilities for study.

¹⁸ The general division of Philippians is in seven passages: 1:3-11; 1:12-26; 1:27–2:18; 2:19-30; 3:1-16; 3:17–4:9; 4:10-20.

¹⁹ See figure 1.1 on page 6 for a diagram of the three interpretative horizons.

CHAPTER 2

THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The Bigger Idea in Philippians

The Big Idea

From the *Rhetoric* of Aristotle¹ to the modern application of Haddon Robinson's Big Idea approach to preaching, there has been a theme in the history of oral communication. At times this theme has almost been obscured, but at other times it has risen to a prominent place. The theme is this: To communicate in an effective way, one must just say one thing. Illustrate it. Bring it to life. But say just one major thing.

As this concept has been applied to preaching, each passage or pericope of Scripture holds one golden idea, which if understood and presented clearly will produce effective communication. If one misses this big idea, communication will be confused.

The Bigger Idea

Now, what if this approach is applied to a particular book of the Bible? For example, consider Paul's epistle to the Philippians. Is there one bigger idea for the whole epistle? This author maintains that there must be, for having one bigger idea is the foundation for effective communication. This was the conviction of Aristotle. I have

¹ In dealing with τάξις (arrangement of a speech), Aristotle writes, "A speech has two parts. Necessarily, you state your case, and you prove it. . . . In Rhetoric we must call these two processes, respectively, Statement and Argument." This statement seems to hold the germ of the idea of subject/complement, but it is not as clearly developed. Aristotle does not seem to take the next step to produce one big idea. Yet it is a beginning. See Aristotle, *The Rhetoric of Aristotle*, trans. Lane Cooper (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1960), 220.

related Aristotle's contribution to the big idea. He also had insight to the "bigger idea" or theme. Aristotle wrote about the three unities in *Poetics*. One of these is the "unity of action."² In discussing the genre of tragedy, he says, "Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude."³ Within a tragic play, there would be many speeches and perhaps narratives. But throughout these segments, or pericopes, there is a unity of one significant, complete action. Aristotle saw unity in the parts and in the whole.

Applying this concept of clear communication, all the various passages in Philippians will be informed by and find their focus from the bigger idea. (This can also be called the theme of the epistle or the main subject of the epistle.) The bigger idea is that which connects the various big ideas of each individual passage. If this larger idea is neglected, then tight focus on a single passage, even when that passage is understood in relation to the pericopes on either side of it, may say less than what Paul intended to communicate.

The Uniqueness of the Church at Philippi

No Other Church Was Like the Church at Philippi

In order to understand this bigger idea in Paul's epistle to the Philippians, it is helpful to understand the unique position that the Philippian church held.⁴ The origin of the church at Philippi signaled the introduction of the gospel into Europe. And its

² The other unities are of place and of time.

³ Aristotle, *The Poetics of Aristotle*, trans. S. H. Butcher (London: Macmillan, 1922), 23.

⁴ "This letter gives us a window to an unusual relationship between the missionary apostle and a church which was his 'partner in the gospel,'" writes Fred B. Craddock, *Philippians*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1985), vii.

relationship with Paul was unique. No other church understood and embraced Paul's mission to the degree that this church did. Paul had a partnership with the Philippians for the advancement of the gospel. This partnership was not found with any other church.

Unlike other churches, there were no major problems at Philippi that Paul had to address in this epistle:⁵

Of all the letters Paul wrote to churches, this one to the Philippians stands out as being the most personal. No sharp rebukes of the congregation mar its joyful spirit: no disturbing problems threaten the progress of the church. The warnings are of a cautionary and preventive nature that are always in order. The frequent emphasis on Christ explains the underlying relationship of Paul to his readers. The names Jesus Christ, Christ Jesus, Lord Jesus Christ, Lord Jesus, Jesus, Christ, Lord, and Savior, occur 51 times in the 104 verses of the Epistle.⁶

Why Paul Wrote to the Philippians

So why did Paul write to this church at this particular time? Epaphroditus had brought a gift from them to Paul,⁷ but Paul did not address this until the end of the letter.⁸ His response was more than a thank-you letter for a gift received, although at times the Philippians were the only ones who supported Paul financially.⁹ This gift, coming at a time when his life was at risk because of the gospel, was a small spark that ignited a large fire.¹⁰ Paul's heart was thrilled, not because the Philippians sent a gift to him but because

⁵ Paul briefly warned against false teachers (Philippians 3:2-4) and urged two women to be in harmony (Philippians 4:2). He also spoke of opponents (Philippians 1:27-28; 3:2-3, 18-19), but his warnings appear to be cautionary. Paul was not correcting any wrong behavior in regard to doctrine or practice. For a review of the reasons that any opponents in Philippi were minimal, see Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 7-10.

⁶ Homer A. Kent Jr., *Philippians*, in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 11:99.

⁷ Philippians 2:26-28.

⁸ Philippians 4:10-18.

⁹ Philippians 4:15-16.

¹⁰ Paul was in prison, and the Christians at Philippi sent a financial gift to him by the hand of Epaphroditus. In turn, Paul sent the epistle back to them by this same agent. Consequently, various commentators say the purpose of the epistle is to thank the Philippians for their gift. This is part of Paul's reason for writing this letter and it allowed Paul to address something much larger and closer to his heart. For an examples of

they were committed to the promotion of the gospel.¹¹ The devotion of the Philippians to Christ and to the promotion of the gospel resonated with Paul.¹² How relieved he must have been that a church finally understood why they existed as a church. This dynamic determined the bigger idea behind the epistle to the Philippians.

Paul appreciated the gift and even more the deeper motivation for the Philippians' giving.¹³ Their support for Paul was support for the gospel. The mere reception of financial help could never be sufficient to account for the pathos of Paul as he cried out, "I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain."

(Philippians 1:20-21 NIV)

A gift from human hands could never account for the intense devotion exhibited when Paul wrote,

But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all

commentaries that see Philippians as a "thank you" letter see: Michael Bentley, *Shining in the Darkness: Philippians Simply Explained* (Durham, England: Evangelical Press, 1997) 11; Bockmuehl, *Epistle to the Philippians*, 33; Maxie Dunnam, *Galatians-Philemon*, The Preacher's Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 249; Maurice Jones, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, Westminster Commentary (London: Methuen & Co., 1918) li-liii; Jac. J. Muller, *The Epistle of Paul to the Philippians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (reprint ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 13-14; P. T. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 35-38.

¹¹ The word *rejoice* is found nine times in this epistle (Philippians 1:18; 2:17-18, 28; 3:1; 4:4, 10). Paul's rejoicing was not in the gift the Philippians sent but in their participation in the gospel and especially in the gospel itself.

¹² "For in Paul's hand everything turns into gospel, including both the formal and material aspects of such a letter. Most significantly, friendship in particular is radically transformed from a two-way to a three-way bond—between him, the Philippians, and Christ. And obviously it is Christ who is the center and focus of everything. Paul and their friendship is predicated on their mutual 'participation/partnership' in the gospel." Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 13.

¹³ Paul wrote "to his longtime friends and compatriots in the gospel," says Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 1.

things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:7-11 NIV)

It could not account for the hymn of worship:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:5-11 NIV)

In reading these Christocentric passages and feeling the warmth of Paul's passion, one finds the bigger idea that Paul saw in the lives of the Philippians and that beat in his own heart. It was this: Devotion to the person of Christ and devotion to the promotion of the gospel are inseparable. As Gordon Fee writes,

Theirs has been a “participation/partnership” in the gospel from the very beginning, a partnership that involved the Philippians themselves in evangelism and in furthering the gospel through their “benefactions” to Paul. That same “partnership” now also includes mutual suffering for the gospel (1:29-30, 2:17).¹⁴

In some of Paul's letters readers meet his polemical reasoning, as when he addresses the Gnostic heresy at Colossae or the doctrinal crisis in the churches in Galatia. In other letters readers see his pastoral ability as he shepherds the Corinthians through

¹⁴ Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 6.

their many problems.¹⁵ But here in the epistle to the Philippians one finds the heart of Paul revealed. This letter is Paul speaking to his friends.¹⁶ It is Paul undistracted by problems. It is undiluted, quintessential Paul. And what one finds is devotion to Christ and devotion to the promotion of the gospel.

Philippi as a Missional Church

The center of Paul's theology is reconciliation, "under which the main features of Paul's kerygma and its practical outworking must be set."¹⁷ This reconciliation has been forever accomplished in Christ, but men and women must accept it by placing their faith in Christ. This waiting offer drove Paul in his mission. More than any other church, the believers at Philippi understood this. They were the first fully missional church.¹⁸

This reconciliation took place at the cross and is freely offered in the gospel. For Paul, this is the absolute focal point. The cross is not a part of Christian theology; it is the foundation on which everything else stands. "The cross brings home the full seriousness of sin, declares the powerlessness of fallen humanity to achieve salvation and exposes

¹⁵ "In contrast to many of Paul's other letters, especially the more polemical and/or apologetic letters such as Galatians and 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philippians reflects all the characteristics of a 'letter of friendship,' combined with those of a 'letter of moral exhortation.'" Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 2.

¹⁶ This was the only church to which Paul could write such a letter based on "good will and loyalty" (Aristotle's highest form of friendship). Paul did not need to lay claim to his authority as an apostle, as he often did in other settings.

¹⁷ R. P. Martin, "Center of Paul's Theology," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 94.

¹⁸ The church at Philippi was the only church that consistently supported Paul in his missionary endeavors. (See Philippians 4:15-16: "Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need" [NIV]). They saw that they were not merely reconciled for their own benefit, but they were part of a greater mission of reconciliation.

human delusion of self-righteousness.”¹⁹ The interaction between Paul and the church at Philippi showed that they understood this reality.

How to Evaluate the Bigger Idea

This bigger idea of devotion to Christ and to the gospel must be the context in which preachers understand and communicate the passages from this epistle. In turn, this statement raises a logical question: How do we as preachers relate each passage to the bigger idea without becoming pedantic or reading too much into individual passages? It is true that when considering the big idea in the context of the bigger idea, the dynamics that arise require more art than science. A preacher cannot apply rigid rules that cover every application. But it is possible to find some markers along the way, and so this author used the following dynamics as guidelines:

1. The bigger idea should never obscure the big idea of the passage.

Let the big idea be the melody and the bigger idea the background harmony, present but not overwhelming. Too much emphasis on the bigger idea can make all the various passages say the same thing.

2. The bigger idea will have as much influence as the particular passage will allow.

The passages that speak directly about devotion to Christ or devotion to the gospel will easily receive a substantial focus. Other passages might allow only

¹⁹ A. E. McGrath, “Theology of the Cross,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 193.

a light influence. It is possible for a passage to stand substantially on its own. In such passages, the bigger idea is present only as general background. It would be redundant or pedantic to emphasize it.

3. Some passages may be seen in a new way as they are considered in the light of the bigger idea.

A new cohesion may be seen throughout the whole book. Passages that seemed difficult to account for in relation to their immediate context may fit perfectly in the context of the bigger idea.

4. Transitions between passages may receive a new clarity when they are considered in view of the bigger idea.

Knowing where a trail is leading will make the various turns easier to understand.

Passages That Define the Bigger Idea

Usage Analysis

An analysis of the percentage²⁰ of times that Paul refers to Christ or Jesus finds that the highest percentage in his writings is in the epistle to the Philippians.²¹ The same is true of Paul's references to the gospel, which is mentioned more often proportionally in

²⁰ Information from Accordance software showing the number of times a particular word is used per one thousand words of text.

²¹ The small book of Philemon, which has the highest percentage, is excluded because its short length reduces the statistical validity.

Philippians than anywhere else in Pauline literature. However, it is not the number of times that Paul refers to these words, but the emphasis he gives to the context in which they are found, that shows their importance.

Exegetical Signposts

A brief review of the exegetical signposts in some of the major passages in Philippians show how references to Christ or the gospel lead one to the bigger idea in this epistle. The following sections highlight either devotion to the promotion of the gospel or devotion to Christ.

Signpost 1: Philippians 1:3-7

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now. *For I am* confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. For it is only right for me to feel this way about you all, because I have you in my heart, since both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers of grace with me. (NASB)

As Paul introduces the letter, it is easy to see the close relationship he has with this church. Paul is a gospel worker, and he commends the Philippians for being the same. Paul has found a kindred group of believers in Philippi. He joyfully prays for them in view of their “participation in the gospel.” F. F. Bruce writes,

What calls forth his grateful joy more particularly here is the energetic wholeheartedness with which the Philippian Christians had cooperated with him *in the work of the gospel* since first he visited their city. While he was with them several of them had “worked hard” with him to “spread the gospel” (4:3), and after his departure they continued their active witness.²²

²² F. F. Bruce, *Philippians: A Good News Commentary*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 7.

This is an ongoing effort on the part of this group of believers.²³ Some commentators see the phrase ἐπὶ τῇ κοινωνίᾳ ὑμῶν as referring to the financial support they sent to Paul,²⁴ but the phrase is not limited to this one aspect.²⁵

This is the work of God. The Philippians heard the gospel and believed. Now they wish to see the same gospel benefits extend to others. This is the perfection and maturity that God desires.²⁶ In fact, Paul uses the strongest language imaginable. He says they have received the same grace to promote the gospel as he has. Paul could not have stated his gospel partnership with this church in any more passionate terms.

This keynote of the gospel will continue throughout this letter.

Signpost 2: Philippians 1:12-14

Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear. (NASB)

²³ Silva translates this verse “because of your participation in the work of the gospel from the beginning of your faith until this very moment.” Moises Silva, *Philippians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 44.

²⁴ “This understanding of κοινωνία [i.e., that they financially supported Paul in the advancement of the gospel] does not exclude, however, reference to the Philippians’ faith, their own efforts at evangelism, nor to their intercession for the progress of the gospel in the world. In its fullest extent κοινωνία means whole-hearted, active participation in every imaginable way with Paul in the ‘labor and suffering’ that was necessary to spread the good news.” Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, Word Biblical Commentary 43 (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 19.

²⁵ Κοινωνία “is a distinctively Pauline word, used by him thirteen of the nineteen times it appears in the NT. The frequent use of this word and its cognates in Philippians is striking (1:5, 7; 2:1; 3:10; 4:15) and provides further proof of the intimate relationship that existed between Paul and the Christians at Philippi.” Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 19.

²⁶ On the other hand, some commentaries see these verses as a promise of personal growth toward maturity apart from any reference to promoting the gospel. See Michael Bentley, *Shining In The Darkness: Philippians Simply Explained*. (Durham, England: Evangelical Press, 1997), 30 and Maurice Jones *The Epistle to the Philippians in Westminster Commentaries*. (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1918), 6.

After validating the Philippians' commitment to the gospel, Paul goes on to show his own commitment to the gospel and how God is rewarding it. His circumstances, unlawful imprisonment²⁷ and delayed justice, have not limited him; rather, they have provided a platform for the greater progress of the gospel! This progress was an acceleration of a spiritual movement that began on the day of Pentecost. Paul describes this advancement with such a note of wonder in his tone that one must conclude that he saw it as a movement that God had sent. Later church historians call such a movement a revival. Even those with impure motives found themselves being used by God for a good cause (Philippians 1:15-18).²⁸

Paul refers to his bonds being “made known in Christ” (*τοὺς δεσμούς μου φανεροὺς ἐν Χριστῷ*). This phrase can have several meanings. The NASB translates it “my imprisonment for the cause of Christ.” This is a general summary of some of these options and works well in the context.²⁹

Paul continues to describe this spiritual awakening: “Most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear.” Brothers and sisters began to experience a new boldness to proclaim Christ even when it might mean imprisonment.³⁰ After all, the fact of Paul’s

²⁷ “Paul’s bonds were literal bonds, for he was constantly chained to a Roman soldier (cf. Acts 28:20).” A. T. Robertson, *Paul’s Joy in Christ: Studies in Philippians*, reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 75.

²⁸ Paul affirms that both groups—sincere believers and self-promoting believers—preach Christ, and he uses three different verbs to emphasize this: “speak the word” (*λαλεῖν*, 1:14), “preach Christ” (*κηρύσσουσιν*, 1:15), and “proclaim Christ” (*καταγγέλλουσιν*, 1:17-18).

²⁹ It became known “that Paul was a prisoner because he was a Christian . . . Christianity, therefore, gained public notice because of Paul’s bonds.” Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 35. See also Fee: “The awkwardness of the clause results from the phrase ‘in Christ.’ The difficulty in this case lies first with the word order and second with its nuance. That it follows ‘manifest’ emphasizes . . . that the various pagans who have come in contact with him have become well aware that his imprisonment is neither for crime or politics, but with his being ‘in Christ’ (= a follower of Christ).” Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 112.

³⁰ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2 vols. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), under 25.161 *τολμάω*, 2:307.

imprisonment was the spark that had begun this fire. Something was new. They experienced a new confidence in the Lord (*ἐν κυρίῳ πεποιθότας*) and a new certainty in what they had been taught and had come to believe.³¹

Signpost 3: Philippians 1:19-21

For I know that this shall turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to my earnest expectation and hope, that I shall not be put to shame in anything, but *that* with all boldness, Christ shall even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. (NASB)

Up to this point Paul has been writing about the gospel. Now he reveals his motivation for spreading the gospel. It is all about Christ. This will become a joint theme throughout the epistle—devotion to the gospel and devotion to Christ.

Paul is in a desperate situation.³² Yet his concern is not for his safety or comfort. He seems to say all will turn out for his deliverance, even as he acknowledges that he may live or die. Paul expects divine help, but this help is not to escape difficulties. Instead, Paul wants to live and die in such a way that Christ will be elevated, illustrious, and esteemed. How others see Christ is more important than how they see Paul. He passionately expects that whatever happens, he can respond with boldness (*παρρησίᾳ*).³³ Confidence (*παρρησίᾳ*) in Jesus and boldness (*παρρησίᾳ*) to speak about him are two sides of one coin.

³¹ *πείθομαι*, “To come to believe the certainty of something on the basis of being convinced—to be certain, to be sure, to be convinced.” Louw and Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon*, under 25.64 *πείθομαι*, 2:296.

³² “Paul’s words *τοῦτό μοι ἀποβῆσται εἰς σωτηρίαν* (this shall turn out for my deliverance) . . . are exactly the words of Job (Job 13:16 LXX).” Bruce, *Philippians*, Additional Notes, 28.

³³ This word has a significant textual history in the New Testament as the work of the Spirit is traced. In the book of Acts, when the religious leaders saw the confidence (*παρρησίᾳ*) of Peter and John, “they were

Paul sums up a conviction with layers of meaning in a simple phrase: “For me to live is Christ, to die is gain.” What gain will this be? Certainly the only thing it could be, more of Christ. Such zeal for Christ is the perfect fire for evangelism.

Signpost 4: Philippians 2:5-11

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, *and* being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE SHOULD BOW, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (NASB)

Paul has been encouraging devotion to the promotion of the gospel and devotion to the person of Christ. Now he shines the light fully on Christ. How can a Christian see him as Lord, be committed to him as Lord, and fail to be committed to the promotion of the gospel? One day all shall confess he is Lord whether they want to or not. This will be universal and cosmic. But now, believers have the inestimable privilege of publically confessing him before others. To the degree that we as believers see his greatness, so we will be committed to the advancement of the gospel.

Believers are to espouse the attitude that was in Christ Jesus. He was a bondservant who showed his humility by becoming obedient to the point of death. Jesus was the ultimate exemplar, but this reminds readers also of Paul’s testimony that he was

astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13 NIV). Subsequently the church prayed not to escape persecution but asked, “Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness ($\pi\alpha\rho\rho\eta\sigma\iota\chi$)” (Acts 4:29 NIV). For other instances that link $\pi\alpha\rho\rho\eta\sigma\iota\chi$ with preaching, see Acts 4:31; 28:31; 2 Corinthians 3:12; Ephesians 6:13.

willing to die for Christ and the gospel. His only request was that Christ would be eminent in his life. Later, Epaphroditus will be lifted up as an example of one who has come near to death for the work of Christ (Philippians 2:29-30). The Philippians, by way of these examples, are emboldened to be witnesses³⁴ for Christ.

Signpost 5: Philippians 2:19-21

But I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly, so that I also may be encouraged when I learn of your condition. For I have no one *else* of kindred spirit who will genuinely be concerned for your welfare. For they all seek after their own interests, not those of Christ Jesus. (NASB)

Paul plans to send two gospel-centered workers to Philippi. The first of these is Timothy. Paul recommends him because he will be concerned for the interests of the Philippians and of Christ Jesus. Timothy is like Paul in these matters. They are of a kindred spirit.³⁵ As the Philippians have seen Paul's commitment to the gospel, so they can expect the same from Timothy.

Signpost 6: Philippians 2:25, 29-30

But I thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger and minister to my need. . . . Therefore receive him in the Lord with all joy, and hold men like him in high regard; because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was deficient in your service to me. (NASB)

³⁴ Jesus said, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8 NIV). The word for witnesses is μάρτυρες, from which derives the word *martyr*. From the beginning, to be a witness had at least the possibility of dying for one's testimony.

³⁵ The word ἴσοψυχος [literally, same soul] means "of like soul or mind." See Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. F. W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), under ἴσοψυχος, 484.

The second gospel-centered worker Paul will send is Epaphroditus. Paul lists his pedigree as “my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier.” His value is in his work for the gospel. The Philippians are instructed to hold men like him in high regard (*ἐντίμους*). A devoted promoter of the gospel should be considered valuable,³⁶ a person of high status, respected and worthy of honor.³⁷ To work for the promotion of the gospel is the high calling. Nothing is more important. Epaphroditus is not cited for being a preacher, but his support for the gospel came through his faithful service in helping others.

Signpost 7: Philippians 3:7-10

But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from *the Law*, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which *comes* from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him. (NASB)

Paul had experienced a world-changing event in his life. All that he had accumulated for his advantage—his standing, reputation, status, position, prestige, all that he had spent his whole life building up—he cast away as so much dung.³⁸ All things were transvalued³⁹ by Christ. And in comparison, Paul is willing to forsake all of it in order to

³⁶ Louw and Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon*, under 65.2 τίμιος ἔντιμος, 2:620.

³⁷ Louw and Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon*, under 87.6 τίμιος ἔντιμος, 2:734.

³⁸ Dung “is the prevailing sense of this word (*σκύβαλον*),” write James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *A Vocabulary of the Greek Testament: Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources*, reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 579.

³⁹ “To evaluate by a new standard or principle, especially by one that varies from conventional standards.” *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), s.v.

gain Christ.⁴⁰ What does it mean to “gain” Christ? This seems to be parallel to Paul’s confession, “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). Paul has Christ now, but there is more to come. As Bruce explains,

He was already “in Christ” but here he speaks of his ambition “to be found in him” (as his words are literally rendered). The aorist tense of the verbs “gain” and “be found” suggests that he is again looking forward to the Day of Christ. But his ambition “to be found in him” on that great day can be realized only if he is continuously and progressively living in union with him during this mortal existence, and to this end Paul gladly jettisons everything else, including his formerly prized righteousness . . . gained by obeying the Law.⁴¹

Signpost 8: Philippians 4:2-3

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord. Indeed, true comrade, I ask you also to help these women who have shared my struggle in *the cause of the gospel*, together with Clement also, and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life. (NASB)

As the apostle comes to the end of his letter, he moves to personal greetings. The same theme of devotion to Christ and devotion to the promotion of the gospel finds an echo here. He addresses two gospel workers: women who have shared in his struggle in promoting the gospel but have been sidetracked. Their future is secure, for their names are in the book of life. But their present effectiveness is hindered because apparently they do not like each other. It is a clash of personalities.⁴² Personal preferences must yield to the greater cause, the higher calling.

⁴⁰ To “gain Christ” and to “know Christ” are two ways to say the same thing. See Bruce, *Philippians*, 88.

⁴¹ Bruce, *Philippians*, 89.

⁴² Kent, *Philippians*, on Philippians 4:2.

Signpost 9: Philippians 4:15-18

And you yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I departed from Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone; for even in Thessalonica you sent *a gift* more than once for my needs. Not that I seek the gift itself, but I seek for the profit which increases to your account. But I have received everything in full, and have an abundance; I am amply supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you have sent, a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God. (NASB)

Paul began his letter praising the Philippians for their participation in the gospel.

Now he ends the letter by describing their financial support as one way in which they had participated in the gospel. But Paul could hardly have downplayed the gift that they sent any more. But he is thrilled about something. They have been co-workers for the gospel from the beginning. There is a profit that increases to their account. In fact, their work is not for Paul. In a sense, their gifts are not for Paul. It is all a sacrifice for God, and it is well pleasing to him. God is the one who will reward them.

Implications for Preaching

Is the Bigger Idea Always Needed for a Sermon?

Is it possible to preach a big idea sermon without knowing the bigger idea? Of course it is, for the most important ingredient for effective communication is the big idea itself. The bigger idea adds additional contextual understanding and supports the big idea. But the big idea of a preaching passage can stand on its own.

Often a pastor may not have the time to discover the bigger idea of a whole book of the Bible in order to preach on one pericope in it. A sermon based on Isaiah 53 for an

Easter service is a good example. The book of Isaiah is filled with prophecies that give no clue to their historical context and occasion of writing. Time would be better served to concentrate on the pericope itself.

Some Sermons Ignore the Big Idea but Serve the Bigger Idea or Biggest Idea

Before the twentieth century, most preachers preached on texts too small to be developed into an expository sermon. (A few of the notable exceptions are Martin Luther,⁴³ John Calvin,⁴⁴ and Samuel Rutherford.⁴⁵) They did not preach on pericopes. The length of a passage matters, as Sidney Greidanus writes: “Although text selection may seem like a trivial issue, it is precisely at this point that many sermons get on the wrong track because preachers select texts that are too brief, or too long, or incomplete, or peripheral.”⁴⁶ The manner in which these pulpit masters selected a text seems to be merely topical. The concept of identifying a pericope large enough to hold a complete big idea did not occur to them. It is true that the use of a single verse at times is justified because it may contain a big idea.⁴⁷ But when they routinely chose single texts for preaching it tells us that they were not in search of a big idea on which to base their

⁴³ “Luther’s commitment to the study of Scripture was also reflected in his preaching which emphasized the biblical text and its meaning. Despite his own scholarship, however, Luther’s preaching was noted for its clarity and simplicity. He was convinced that people must understand a sermon if it was to compel them to act on its message.” Michael Duduit, ed., *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 36. A typical text selection for a sermon was his choice of Galatians 4:1-7. See Martin Luther, *A Selection of the Most Celebrated Sermons of Martin Luther* (New York: S. & D. Forbes, Printers, 1830), 29-40.

⁴⁴ Calvin would usually preach from a text greater than one verse, but not always a complete preaching section. For example, see his sermon on 1 Timothy 2:3-5. John Calvin, *A Selection of the Most Celebrated Sermons of John Calvin* (New York: S. & D. Forbes, Printers, 1830), 96-110.

⁴⁵ Most of Rutherford’s sermons tend to be more than just one verse. See the Contents page in Samuel Rutherford, *Quaint Sermons of Samuel Rutherford* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1885), vii-viii.

⁴⁶ Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 124.

⁴⁷ “On one hand, therefore, one ought to keep an open mind to the possibility that a sentence may be such a concise summary or may be so rich in meaning that it may well form a preaching-text in its own right.” Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, 127.

sermons. Nevertheless, there are many preachers in this group who loved Jesus, promoted the kingdom of God, and served the purpose of God in their generation. But they knew little of expository preaching. Among these are Chrysostom⁴⁸ (347-407), Augustine⁴⁹ (354-430), John Wyclif⁵⁰ (1324-1384), John Owen⁵¹ (1616-1683), John Flavel⁵² (1630-1691), George Whitefield⁵³ (1714-1770), D. L. Moody⁵⁴ (1837-1899), Joseph Parker⁵⁵ (1830-1902), and, later, Peter Marshall⁵⁶ (1902-1949).

These men breathed the great themes of the Bible—rehearsing them in their minds and expounding them in their homilies or sermons and prayers. It is no wonder that their sermons were filled with these themes, for “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.” Their messages were all about the work of God and specifically the life,

⁴⁸ Most of his homilies on Matthew’s Gospel consist of one or two verses. For example, see Homily 12 on Matthew 3:13, “Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to the Jordan.”

Philip Schaff, ed., *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, first series, vol. 10, *Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of St. Matthew* (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1888), 75.

⁴⁹ Augustine was a champion of the biggest idea. As James Denny wrote, “It is the supreme distinction of Augustine among the representatives of the ancient Church that he conceived Christ fundamentally as the mediator of the love of God to sinful men, and that when he spoke of that love, he charged it with all the meaning that can be drawn from the gospel story. None of the fathers is steeped as he was in the synoptic gospels. None had learned so profoundly as he from the whole life and passion of Jesus, what the love of God to sinners means.” James Denny, *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1918), 60. But his sermons were often based on a single text such as “Thine eyes shall see the king in his beauty” (Isaiah 33:17). See John M. Ashley, *Saint Augustine the Preacher* (London: J. T. Hayes, 1877), Sermon 19, p. 74.

⁵⁰ A list of Wyclif’s preaching texts on the Gospels shows one verse per sermon (Mark 1:1; Matthew 3:1; 11:7; John 1:15, etc. See Thomas Arnold, ed., *Select English Works of John Wyclif*, vol. 2, *Sermons on the Ferial Gospels and Sunday Epistles* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1871), vii.

⁵¹ Owen tended to use single verses for sermons. See *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 8 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1862).

⁵² Flavel preached on single verses. See John Flavel, *The Fountain of Life* (New York: American Tract Society, 1820).

⁵³ Whitefield typically chose a single verse to preach from, such as Luke 13:3; Acts 26:28; Isaiah 26:15. See George Whitefield, *Selected Sermons of George Whitefield* (Philadelphia: The Union Press, 1904), v.

⁵⁴ Moody would preach on part of a verse: “Where Art Thou?” (Genesis 3:9) or “There Is No Difference” (Romans 3:22). See D. L. Moody, *Addresses* (Chicago: Fleming H. Revell, n.d.).

⁵⁵ As another example, Parker used single verses for preaching texts such as Isaiah 14:2, or he would gather several single verses on which to base a sermon: Luke 2:49 with John 4:34 and John 2:17. See Joseph Parker, *The City Temple Sermons* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1870).

⁵⁶ See Peter Marshall, *John Doe, Disciple* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963). Marshall has various passing references to Bible verses as they relate to the theme he is propounding, but there is no central passage for any of his sermons.

death, and resurrection of Christ. Their congregations probably knew a lot about these great themes but very little about any specific passage.

But these preachers were masters of the biggest idea. The glories of Christ and the wonders of his grace breathed through every sermon they preached.⁵⁷ They had amazing gifts for public speaking. Presenting every sermon in the form of Christ-centered preaching gave their messages a power that exists even today. One might wonder that if they had understood the big idea approach to preaching, what further dimensions would have been added to their sermons. They had the larger picture but missed the smaller context of preaching an idea. For this they would have needed to think in terms of paragraphs, not of a single text or phrase.

Still, these pulpit masters can be an example to contemporary preachers. Too often sermons faithfully present the big idea but never move to the biggest idea. Because of this, they will never have the scope of power that the kerygma (Christ-centered preaching) brings. They will have depth but not breadth.

In between the big idea and the biggest idea is the often-neglected bigger idea. One can easily find hundreds of excellent examples of big idea sermons and of sermons that exalt the biggest idea. But where are the sermons that consistently take the context of a passage within the book where it is found? Where is the bigger idea? Usually it is absent.

⁵⁷ “Dale . . . Bushnell, and Newman, and Spurgeon—they were always willing to stop at the village window, but they always linked the streets with the heights, and sent your souls a-roaming over the eternal hills of God. And this it is which always impresses me, and impresses me more and more—the solemn spaciousness of their themes, the glory of their unveilings, their wrestlings with language to make the glory known, the voice of the Eternal in their practical appeals; and this it is which so profoundly moved their hearers to ‘wonder, love, and praise.’” J. H. Jowett, *The Preacher: His Life and Work* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1912), 96.

Conclusion

As this author has mentioned before, the approach to understanding a passage in three contexts can be summed up by this diagram:

Big Idea (passage) —> Bigger Idea (book) —> Biggest Idea (Christ)⁵⁸

These are the three horizons that the Philippians could see. It formed the basis for their understanding as the original recipients of the epistle. In a similar way, if today preachers use these three contextual horizons to understand and communicate an idea based on a pericope, one has the best approach possible.

In the next chapter the author reviewed how various books on preaching have evaluated these contextual horizons. He also examined how commentaries have approached the theme (bigger idea) of Philippians. This author has discovered that the theme of Philippians is often not stated or is misunderstood.

⁵⁸ This is a repeat of figure 1.1 on page 6.

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

Relating a Preaching Text to the Bigger Idea or the Biggest Idea

Overview

In chapter 1, three contextual horizons were proposed. These horizons are:

Big Idea (passage) —> Bigger Idea (book) —> Biggest Idea (Christ)¹

These concepts are found in many books on expository preaching but often are expressed in other terms.

None of the books reviewed by this author used the terms “bigger idea” or “biggest idea.” Rather, they refer to the theme of a book or the “grand theme”² of the Bible or something similar. Most of these books agree that larger contexts are necessary to help readers understand individual passages. Walter Kaiser puts it this way,

If we’re to hear the words of the prophets in a way that is both faithful to their original context and of contemporary usefulness to us, we must first determine the basic theme or purpose of each prophetic book from which we wish to preach. It will also be helpful to show how the purpose of the book fits in with the overall unifying theme of the whole Old Testament and the theme or central plan of the whole Bible.³

There is a powerful synergism when small and large contexts converge. This junction is like an efficient telescope that brings a blurry object into sharp focus.

¹ This is a repeat of figure 1.1 on page 6.

² For example see Bruce L. Shelley, “The Big Idea and Biblical Theology’s Grand Theme,” in *The Big Idea of Biblical Preaching*, ed. Keith Willhite and Scott M. Gibson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 95-107.

³ Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 102.

The Bigger Idea

Expository preaching and thinking always seek to be faithful to the context of a passage. An important step in this process of discovery is to understand the bigger idea; Gordon Fee says it is the first step:

Before the investigation of any sentence, paragraph, or other subsection of a document, one always needs to have a good sense about the entire document. Who is the author? Who are the recipients? What is the relationship between them? Where do the recipients live? What are their present circumstances? What historical situation occasioned this writing? What is the author's purpose? What is the overall theme or concern? Does the argument or narrative have an easily discerned outline?⁴

The Biggest Idea

In addition to the bigger idea, there is the biggest idea. The biggest idea must be about Jesus for Christ-centered preaching to take place. This is true of the Old Testament as well as the New,⁵ but the biggest idea can go by many names. Some commentators refer to it as “the coming kingdom of God,”⁶ which Bruce Shelley describes this way:

Through the centuries preachers like Calvin, Augustine, and Books, men who dared to tell others how to preach, have recognized a persistent theme that runs like a gold and scarlet thread through the Bible. Some call it “the knowledge of God,” “the covenant,” or “redemption’s story.” The most persistent phrase is probably “the Word of God.” Pastors, preachers, and reformers, like Luther, recognized that this dominant theme comes to us in three ways: first, in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh; second, in the written Word of Scripture; and third . . . in the Word preached!⁷

⁴ Gordon D. Fee, *New Testament Exegesis*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 8.

⁵ Tim Keller says that preaching Christ from the Old Testament does not arise from types in the original author’s mind. Rather, themes of redemption can always find their greatest fulfillment in Christ. Keller moves from first dealing with the original intention of the author to the application to believers today. Then, to close, he brings his hearers to Christ as the final destination of all Scripture. This grand conclusion can arise from humble beginnings. See Tim Keller, “Preaching to the Heart,” *Pulpit Talk* 5, no. 3 (spring 2007).

⁶ Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 215.

⁷ Shelley, “The Big Idea and Biblical Theology’s Grand Theme,” 100.

The whole Bible is about the ultimate redemptive act of God in Christ.⁸ So, one needs to see how a text relates to Jesus. Jesus himself said the Scriptures bore witness of him (John 5:39). Thus, relating the text to Jesus results in grace-centered, Christ-centered preaching. One can get at this connection by asking, *What does this text tell me about God?* and *What does this text tell me about the human condition and me?*⁹

The biggest idea must be about Jesus, but it does not always need to use his name.¹⁰ As Bryan Chapell writes, “A sermon remains expository and Christ-centered not because it leapfrogs to Golgotha, but because it locates the intent of the passage within the scope of God’s redemptive work.”¹¹

The biggest idea also must be about the biggest subjects possible. Whatever terms one uses, the preaching must be about God and what God has accomplished in Christ Jesus, as John Piper explains,

My burden . . . is to plead for the supremacy of God in preaching—that the *dominant note* of preaching be the freedom of God’s sovereign grace, that the *unifying theme* be the zeal that God has for his own glory, that the *grand object* of preaching be the infinite and inexhaustible being of God, that the *pervasive atmosphere* of preaching be the holiness of God. Then when preaching takes up the ordinary things of life (family, job, leisure, friendships) or the crises of our day (AIDS, divorce, addictions, depression, abuses, poverty, hunger, and worst of all, unreached peoples of the world), these matters are not only taken up—they are taken up all the way into God.¹²

⁸ “The common thread that ties the Old and New Testaments together is the single theme of the promise of God. This thread of promise is known by a host of other terms, such as *blessing*, the *contents* of the numerous covenants in the Bible, or the redemptive *history of God’s salvation*.” Kaiser, *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament*, 107-8.

⁹ The ideas in this paragraph come from “Christ-Centered Preaching,” *Pulpit Talk* 4, no. 4 (summer 2006).

¹⁰ Every expository sermon must be theocentric, but not every sermon must mention Jesus by name. See Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 295-96.

¹¹ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 296.

¹² John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 23-24.

The Preaching Benefit

The theme of a book can help an expositor to make choices concerning the material he or she will include in a sermon on a passage. There is always too much information and invariably many ways to approach a message. Which way is best? Sidney Greidanus explains how to approach the epistles:

Since passages from the Epistles are frequently crammed with details, it is easy for preachers to go off on a tangent. In view of this possibility, it may be worthwhile to go over the sermon after it is finished and to use the theme as a knife to cut out all ideas, illustrations, and images that do not support the theme. It undoubtedly takes courage to eliminate good ideas, but in the end it is better to communicate one theme well than to clutter up the sermon with many different ideas that obscure its very point.¹³

This though also applies to the Gospels:

It is best to find timeless, preachable truths from the whole preaching portion rather than its minutia. As a safeguard against SAM [spiritualizing, allegorizing, or moralizing] we contend that the *whole* be understood at three levels: the occasion and purpose of the *whole* Gospel; the *whole* section comprised of multiple preaching portions, including various genres and sub genres that jointly contribute to the theme of the Gospel; and finally the *whole* preaching portion.¹⁴

This writer agrees with his approach. There must be some way other than subjective feelings to decide which information is included in a sermon. One of the objective yardsticks is the bigger idea, which provides a paradigm that allows expositors to see the big idea and supporting material more clearly. It enables us as expositors to detect whether material is primary or secondary or tertiary.

¹³ Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, 334.

¹⁴ Randal Peltz and Jeff Carroll, "If You Can't Spiritualize, Allegorize, or Moralize, What's a Preacher to Do? Preaching Christ from Gospel Narratives," *Journal of the Evangelical Homiletics Society* 5, no. 1 (March 2005): 42-43.

Similarly, understanding the biggest idea is a valuable aid to understanding the big idea, as Shelley says: “Our most direct step toward a significant big idea from a given passage of Scripture is to search for the passage’s link with the grand theme.”¹⁵

From the consideration of books on expository preaching the writer now focuses on a review of commentaries on Paul’s epistle to the Philippians.

Commentaries on Philippians

Discriminating between Occasion and Purpose

The setting or occasion surrounding the writing of this epistle is striking. It provides the perfect introduction to the theme in which Paul wishes to engage. The apostle was in prison in Rome for promoting the gospel. The Philippians sent Epaphroditus with a gift for Paul (Philippians 2:26-28) to support him in his work. During this time Epaphroditus came close to death for the work of Christ (Philippians 2:25-30), so Paul sent him back with the letter to the Philippians, his partners in the gospel.¹⁶ This gospel milieu signals where Paul will take his readers and hearers. Some commentaries on Philippians and reference books consider these occasional details surrounding the epistle as a way to understand the purpose for its writing.¹⁷

¹⁵ Shelley, “The Big Idea and Biblical Theology’s Grand Theme,” 101.

¹⁶ Paul is concerned to relate to the details of his imprisonment to the believers in Philippi. He wants to let them know the high regard he holds for their messenger Epaphoditus. He thanks them for their support. But all these are sub-plots and are not the purpose for his writing. This hypothesis is more fully detailed in chapter two.

¹⁷ See the commentaries listed in footnote 23 in this chapter.

The occasion or setting does play an important factor in the timing of the epistle.

Epaphroditus was going back to Philippi. This may seem to be a subsidiary fact for contemporary readers, but for Paul it was paramount. As Harry Gamble explains,

The mobility of Christians around the Mediterranean world was already a factor in the earliest phases of the dissemination of Christian writings. In the absence of a public postal service, Paul's letters, like any other private correspondence, were entrusted to associates or friends for delivery, and these couriers are sometimes mentioned in the letters themselves (Rom. 16:1; 1 Cor. 16:10; Eph. 6:21; Col. 4:7; compare 2 Cor. 8:16-7).¹⁸

For a letter to travel from Rome to Philippi would mean a journey of at least 700 miles by land or at least 900 miles by sea.¹⁹ With good weather and a steady walker this journey would take about thirty-nine days, or longer if weather and weariness came in.²⁰ Therefore, Paul could not miss the opportunity that this provided.²¹

Other commentaries find the purpose of the Philippian letter to be in the promotion of the gospel and the promotion of Christ. The dichotomy of these views taken by commentators will be appraised in the next section.

Commenting on Commentaries

Commentaries do not deal with the big idea for each pericope. It follows, therefore, that they do not relate the individual big ideas to the bigger idea of Philippians. The best approach to gain some direction is to evaluate the theme or purpose for Philippians as defined by the writers of the commentaries.

¹⁸ Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 96.

¹⁹ Walter Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 21.

²⁰ For a discussion of this see Moises Silva, *Philippians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992) 6.

²¹ The “primary reason for writing at this particular time” was the return of Epaphroditus. Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, Black’s New Testament Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 33.

As an example, William Barclay writes that the reasons for writing the epistle were (1) to give thanks for the gift, (2) to give an update on Epaphroditus, and (3) to give encouragement in the face of the Philippians' trials, etc.²² Many commentators will repeat some or all of this mantra,²³ but it falls short of the bigger idea as propounded in this thesis. Other writers do not refer to the theme or purpose.²⁴ Others see the main theme as joy²⁵ or unity.²⁶

²² William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2003), 7.

²³ This group focuses on situational details: Michael Bentley, *Shining in the Darkness: Philippians Simply Explained* (Durham, England: Evangelical Press, 1997) 11; Bockmuehl, *Epistle to the Philippians*, 33; Maxie Dunnam, *Galatians-Philemon*, The Preacher's Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 249; Maurice Jones, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, Westminster Commentary (London: Methuen & Co., 1918) li-liii; Jac. J. Muller, *The Epistle of Paul to the Philippians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (reprint ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 13-14; P. T. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 35-38.

²⁴ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians* (Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, 1851); John Eadie, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (reprint ed.; Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2005); Mark J. Edwards, ed., *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*, vol. VIII, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999); C. J. Ellicott, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Philippians, the Colossians, and Philemon* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1888); Henry Alford, *The Epistles to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, The Greek Testament (Cambridge: Deighton, Bell, and Co., 1865); R. Kent Hughes, *Philippians: Preaching the Word Series* (Wheaton, IL: Good News & Crossway, 2007); William Kelly, *Lectures on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Philippians* (Glasgow: R. L. Allan, n. d.); H. A. A. Kennedy, *Philippians*, vol. 3, in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, ed. W. A. T. Robertson Nicoll (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1903); Alexander MacLaren, *Philippians*, in *Expositions of Holy Scripture* (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, n.d.); H. A. W. Meyer, *The Epistles to the Philippians and Colossians*, part 9 in *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1875); H. C. G. Moule, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, Thornapple Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981); Alfred Plummer, *A Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* (London: Robert Scott Roxburgh House, 1929); Robert Rainy, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, in *The Expositor's Bible* (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1893); A. T. Robertson, *Paul's Joy in Christ: Studies in Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979); William Taylor, *Partnership* (Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2007); T. Walker, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (New York: Macmillan, 1919); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Joyful* (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communications Ministries, 2005).

²⁵ James Montgomery Boice, *Philippians: An Expositional Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 12.

²⁶ F. F. Bruce, *Philippians: A Good News Commentary*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 8-9, 19; David E. Garland, *Philippians*, in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 183; Frank Thielman, *Philippians*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 24.

Some commentators combine several subthemes such as joy and unity as Paul's purpose for writing.²⁷

Several secondary themes are proposed as the unifying theme in Philippians. But all of them serve the bigger idea of Christ and the gospel. Suffering²⁸ is a secondary theme, and it is not suffering in general that Paul wrote about but suffering for the gospel. Joy and rejoicing²⁹ are secondary themes, and their cause is connected with the gospel and the Philippians' faithfulness to the gospel. Similarly, unity³⁰ is a secondary theme, and its purpose is that Christ would be exalted and the gospel promoted.

Gerald Hawthorne lists eight reasons for Paul's purpose for writing Philippians, but for him, there is no unifying theme, no bigger idea.³¹ R. C. H. Lenski sees the purpose for writing only as a preparation for travel, for Epaphroditus and later for Paul himself.³² Ralph Martin believes that in Paul's defense of Epaphroditus against any criticism, one

²⁷ Caffin, *Philippians*.

²⁸ "In Philippians this correspondence involves the vocational terminology of Paul and Timothy (*douloi Christou*) and the themes of 'servant' and 'imprisonment' in the letter proper e.g., 'my imprisonment (*desmous*) is for Christ' (1:13); the merging of 'servant' and 'suffering' (1:17); Christ 'taking the form of a servant (*morphen doulou laban*) humbled himself' (2:7); 'served with me in the gospel' (*syn emoi edouleusen eis to euangelion*, 2:22); cf. 2:17, 25; 3:7-8, 17; 4:3. The meaning of being a servant of Christ and the related experience of suffering are definite themes throughout the letter." Ronald Russell, "Pauline Letter Structure in Philippians," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25, no. 3 (September 1982): 297.

²⁹ For example, see Philippians 1:3-5: "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now" (NASB). ("Prayer is made by the apostle as a consequence of the recipient's fellowship or partnership in the gospel, which involves 'imprisonment,' 'defense' and 'confirmation' of the gospel [1:7].") Russell, "Pauline Letter Structure in Philippians," 299.

³⁰ Philippians 1:27: "Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ; so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel" (NASB).

³¹ Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, Word Biblical Commentary 43 (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), xlvii-xlviii.

³² R. C. H. Lenski, *Philippians*, in *An Interpretation of the New Testament*, 12 vols. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1963), 694-95.

finds “the most obvious purpose which prompted the writing of the epistle.”³³ The next section will present an opposing view to the commentaries just reviewed.

Commentators That Support All or Part of This Thesis

This thesis depends on the bigger idea of the letter to the Philippians, which is this: *Devotion to the person of Christ and devotion to the promotion of the gospel are inseparable*. Commentaries that see the purpose and focus of Philippians to be on Christ and on the gospel support this thesis.

Fred B. Craddock states the bigger idea of Philippians this way: “This letter gives us a window to an unusual relationship between the missionary apostle and a church which was his ‘partner in the gospel.’ Throughout this study we will be very aware of that relationship and what it meant for the advance of the gospel.”³⁴ This writer concurs with this approach, as far as it goes.

More than any other commentary author, Gordon Fee understands and emphasizes the bigger idea of Philippians that is proposed in this thesis. His constant focus on the gospel as the living heart of the friendship between Paul and the Philippians is vital to this thesis. The prominence he gives to Christ is also at the heart of this thesis. Considering Philippians as a piece of first-century literature, he explains:

But “hortatory letter of friendship” is only part of the story, and in many ways the least significant part at that. For in Paul’s hands everything turns into gospel, including both the formal and material aspects of such a letter. Most significantly, friendship in particular is radically transformed from a two-way to a three-way bond—between him, the Philippians, and Christ. And obviously it is Christ who is the center and focus of everything.

³³ Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 42.

³⁴ Fred B. Craddock, *Philippians*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1985), vii.

Paul's and their friendship is predicated on their mutual 'participation/partnership' *in the gospel*. . . . This three-way bond . . . is the glue that hold the letter together.³⁵

Fee continues in his evaluation of the theme in Philippians:

Paul's overarching concern is with the gospel, a word that occurs more often in this letter than in any of the others. His specific concern for the Philippians in this regard is with their ongoing relationship with Christ; all of the hortatory sections and much else has the strengthening of this relationship as their aim.³⁶

Walter Hansen writes concerning devotion to the promotion of the gospel as one major theme:

Paul's driving passion in all of his work is "defending and confirming the gospel," "to advance the gospel," and "the defense of the gospel" (1:7, 12, and 16). He writes this letter to thank the Philippians for their "partnership in the gospel" (1:5) since the early days of their "acquaintance with the gospel" (4:15). His first and overarching imperative to the Philippians is to "live as citizens in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, . . . striving together with one accord for the faith of the gospel" (1:27). The highest commendation Paul gives of his co-workers is that they "served with me in the work of the gospel" and "contended at my side in the cause of the gospel" (2:22, 4:3). The gospel of Christ takes first place in Paul's mission and his letter.³⁷

He affirms that the gospel of Christ is one of the two major themes. His second theme is the community in Christ. Fee also emphasizes the common fellowship of the believers in Philippi but centers it in their common partnership in the gospel.³⁸

H. A. Ironside writes, "The theme of the whole might be put in three words, '*Christ is all!*' It is the epistle of Christ."³⁹ This view supports half of this thesis.

³⁵ Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 13.

³⁶ Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 14.

³⁷ G. Walter Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 31.

³⁸ See footnote 34.

³⁹ H. A. Ironside, *Philippians and Colossians* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007; originally published 1920), 14.

J. B. Lightfoot wrote, “The Philippians Epistle may be taken to exhibit the normal type of the Apostle’s teaching when not determined and limited by individual circumstances, and thus to present the essential substance of the Gospel. . . . Neither a dogmatic system nor an ethical code, but a Person and a Life.”⁴⁰ Lightfoot is famous for his consideration that there is no form or format in this epistle.⁴¹ But he does support the two aspects of this thesis.

J. Alec Motyer sees three themes: unity of the church, attack upon the church, and the coming great day. But he continues to say the one unifying factor is the “Person of our Lord Jesus Christ.”⁴² This supports half of this thesis.

Marvin R. Vincent sees Christ as the center of Paul’s life and the center of his correspondence with the Philippians. Paul writes about the gospel, not to correct any doctrinal error but out of the abundance of his heart.⁴³ And he writes to exalt Christ.⁴⁴ After Fee, Vincent is the commentator who is most fully in agreement with this thesis.

⁴⁰ J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians* (reprint ed.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), ix.

⁴¹ “Of plan and arrangement that is even less than in St. Paul’s letters generally. The origin and motive of the Epistle are hardly consistent with any systematic treatment. . . . Even the threefold division into the explanatory, doctrinal, and hortatory portions, which may generally be discerned in his epistles, is obliterated here.” Lightfoot, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians*, 67.

⁴² J. A. Motyer, *The Message of Philippians*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 18-22.

⁴³ The epistle “exhibits the substance and heart of the gospel rather than its relation to any specific form of doctrinal error.” Marvin R. Vincent, *The Epistles to the Philippians and to Philemon*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1976), xxxiv.

⁴⁴ “The moral inspiration which it [the epistle] represents has its impelling center in a person and a life, and not in a code. The personal Christ is at its very heart. It exhibits Christ *in* Paul rather than *before* him. Christ is not a subject of controversy; he is not simply a pattern of conduct. He is the sum of Paul’s life.” Vincent, *The Epistles to the Philippians and to Philemon*, xxxv.

Commentaries Recommended for the Study of Philippians

This writer has reviewed more than fifty commentaries on Paul's epistle to the Philippians, and some of them would be recommended for any study of this epistle. These commentaries are placed in alphabetical order by author.

Bockmuehl, Markus. *The Epistle to the Philippians*, Black's New Testament Commentary. No understanding of Greek is required.

Bruce, F. F. *Philippians: A Good News Commentary*. This volume is proof that a commentary can be small (154 pages) and yet exceedingly helpful. It has more constructive insights and scholarship than many commentaries twice its size. No Greek is required.

Fee, Gordon D. *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament. This is the best commentary on Philippians that this writer has found. It achieves the rare quality of being both scholarly and readable. An understanding of Greek is not required but would be helpful.

Garland, David E. *Philippians*, in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (rev. ed.), edited by Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland. No Greek is required for this commentary.

Hansen, G. Walter. *The Letter to the Philippians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Understanding Greek is not required.

Lightfoot, J. B. *St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians*. An understanding of Greek would be very helpful with this commentary.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ This commentary is available as a free download at <http://www.archive.org/details/a590773100lighuoft>.

O'Brien, P. T. *The Epistle to the Philippians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary. An understanding of Greek would be helpful with this commentary.

Vincent, Marvin R. *The Epistles to the Philippians and to Philemon*, International Critical Commentary. An understanding of Greek would be helpful with this commentary.⁴⁶

Conclusions

Just as the majority of commentators neglect to define the big idea of a passage, so also they are remiss about the bigger idea of a book. They are not trained in this kind of thinking.

An effective big idea explains the various verses and thoughts in a passage. It accounts for their presence. An effective bigger idea explains the passages and secondary themes in a book. The same kind of analysis and expository thinking is required for both.

The books on expository preaching that are referenced did a good job in understanding the need for the bigger idea. They also were excellent in their understanding of the critical need for the biggest idea to be properly related to any preaching passage.

In chapter 4, this author will enable a preacher to present the book of Philippians in seven sermons. As background study, an exegetical outline as well as supporting material is provided. Then the big idea and the development of the big idea in the passage

⁴⁶ This commentary is available as a free download at <http://www.archive.org/details/criticalexegetic00vincuoft>.

are demonstrated. Finally, the benefit of connecting the big ideas of individual passages in a book to the book's overall theme or bigger idea is evaluated.

CHAPTER 4

HOW THE BIGGER IDEA IN PHILIPPIANS

INFLUENCES THE BIG IDEA IN EACH PREACHING SECTION

Prolegomena

The Purpose of This Chapter

This chapter is designed to provide a seven-session preaching series on the book of Philippians. It will be used as a case study to show preachers the value of connecting the ideas of individual passages in a book to the book's overall theme or bigger idea. The study is to train pastors and teachers who already champion the big idea approach to preaching. It will add one more element in which they incorporate the bigger idea.

The main concern will be how the big idea of each passage relates to the bigger idea¹ of the epistle, and in a minor way, its relationship to the biggest idea. The approach to understanding a passage in three contexts can be summed up by this diagram:

Big Idea (passage) —> Bigger Idea (book) —> Biggest Idea (Christ)²

Outcomes and Objectives

The learning outcomes and supporting objectives will be the same for each sermon that is presented.

¹ This is the overall theme of the epistle.

² This is a repeat of figure 1.1 on page 6.

Learning Outcome for Each Sermon

You will be able to preach the big idea in this passage in the light of the bigger idea in Philippians.

Supporting Objectives for Each Sermon

1. You will be able to identify the big idea in each preaching section in Philippians.

2. You will be able to understand how to apply the four dynamics³ that show the influence of the bigger idea.

Background Understanding

In chapter 2 there is a requisite amount of material for the presenter's background knowledge and understanding. This material represents what is done as preparation in the study, not what is preached in the pulpit. There you will find a review of the identity and uniqueness of the church at Philippi.⁴ You will also discover the passages that define the bigger idea in the epistle to the Philippians.⁵

The Bigger Idea

The bigger idea in Philippians is this: *Devotion to the promotion of the gospel and devotion to the person of Christ are inseparable.* They are two sides of one coin, that is, one cannot see one without seeing the other.⁶

³ These four dynamics are listed on pages 56-57.

⁴ Chapter 2, pages 21-25.

⁵ Chapter 2, pages 27-36.

⁶ See Chapter 2, pages 20-21.

So what does one do with a bigger idea? Does it have more weight or importance than a big idea? This bigger idea of devotion to Christ and to the gospel must be the context in which preachers understand and communicate the passages from this epistle. In turn, this statement raises a logical question: How do we as preachers relate each passage to the bigger idea without becoming pedantic or reading too much into individual passages? It is true that when considering the big idea in the context of the bigger idea, the dynamics that arise require more art than science. A preacher cannot apply rigid rules that cover every application. But it is possible to find some dynamics that can serve as guidelines. Here are the four dynamics.

1. The bigger idea should never obscure the big idea of the passage. Let the big idea be the melody and the bigger idea the background harmony, present but not overwhelming. Too much emphasis on the bigger idea can make all the various passages say the same thing.

2. The bigger idea will have as much influence as the particular passage will allow. The passages that speak directly about devotion to Christ or devotion to the gospel will easily receive a substantial focus. Other passages might allow only a light influence. It is possible for a passage to stand substantially on its own. In such passages, the bigger idea is present only as general background. It would be redundant or pedantic to emphasize it.

3. Some passages may be seen in a new way as they are considered in the light of the bigger idea. A new cohesion may be seen throughout the whole book. Passages that seemed difficult to account for in relation to their immediate context may fit perfectly in the context of the bigger idea.

4. Transitions between passages may receive a new clarity when they are considered in view of the bigger idea. Knowing where a trail is leading will make the various turns easier to understand.

These dynamics will be applied the preaching texts in the following seven sermons.

Content Paradigm

This author will show the exegetical idea for each passage and its main points. Some supporting information will also be provided. This is only for the preacher's information. In the sermon, the preacher needs only to present the homiletical big idea and the details of its supporting points and the bigger idea. This second factor can be visual, via PowerPoint® or handouts, or can be spoken to highlight the big idea. The bigger idea should never overshadow or compete with the big idea. What the audience should remember from every sermon is its big idea. What they should remember from the whole series is the bigger idea.

Preaching Aids

If these sermons are preached on a Sunday morning, one can use PowerPoint® or a handout. On each Sunday the bigger idea is at the top and the big idea for that Sunday is on the bottom. Let them be seen at the same together so the interdependence can be seen.

If this series is being presented to a small group, purchase a quarter-inch black foam poster board. On the top put a smaller white board with the bigger idea of Philippians stated.⁷ On the bottom of the board put a smaller white board with the big idea for the passage that will be studied during that session.⁸

Seven Sermons from Paul's Letter to the Philippians

Sermon 1: Philippians 1:3-11⁹

Exegetical Idea: Paul is thrilled that the Philippians are his partners in the gospel.

1. This partnership is why Paul joyfully prays for them (1:3-5).¹⁰
2. This partnership is why Paul is confident that God is at work in them (1:6).¹¹
3. This partnership is why Paul longs for them (1:7-8).

⁷ Devotion to the promotion of the gospel and devotion to the person of Christ are inseparable.

⁸ These boards can be purchased from Staples office-supply store pre-sized and ready to use. This author printed out the text in landscape view with the largest size that would fit. See appendix 3 for a photo of the poster.

⁹ Paul's greeting in Philippians 1:1-2 should be read but should receive no comments.

¹⁰ There are subpoints under many of the major points. The preacher can determine them and address them if he or she wishes.

¹¹ "Their eager partnership in Paul's gospel ministry was a sure sign of the work of grace that had begun to be accomplished in their lives when they first believed the saving message." F. F. Bruce, *Philippians*, New International Bible Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1983), 31-32.

4. This partnership is why Paul prays that their love would abound more and that they will approve the things that are excellent and bring glory to God (1:9-11).

At first glance, verses 9-11 seem to have less to do with the gospel. But Paul prays that their love would abound with a specific focus in mind: that they would abound in knowledge and discernment. This “full knowledge ($\varepsilon\pi\gamma\gamma\omega\sigma\iota\varsigma$) is a term usually reserved in Paul for the true knowledge of God and his revelation in Christ.”¹² It is all about the gospel. It is when they are Christ-centered and gospel-centered that they will approve the things that are excellent¹³ and live in a way that brings glory to God.

Homiletical Big Idea:¹⁴ This is the work of God: that you become his partners in the gospel.

1. This gospel partnership brings joy into the Christian life (1:3-5).
2. This gospel partnership shows that God is at work in you and will continue his good work (1:6).
3. This gospel partnership deepens fellowship between believers (1:7-8).
4. This gospel partnership helps you determine what really matters and brings glory to God (1:9-11).

¹² Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, Black’s New Testament Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 67.

¹³ Bockmuehl translates this phrase as “determine what really matters.” For Paul, this is Christ and the gospel. See Bockmuehl, *Epistle to the Philippians*, 67.

¹⁴ The points of development in the homiletical idea do not necessarily follow the points of development in the exegetical idea. But it is easier for the audience to follow along in their Bibles if they do. So unless there is a compelling reason to change it, this author developed the homiletical idea as it proceeded straight through a passage.

Bigger Idea Evaluated According to the Four Dynamics

The passage under study introduces the letter and is clearly aligned with the bigger idea. Paul remembers the Philippians with thankfulness and prays for them with joy (v. 4). This is based on their special partnership in the gospel from the first day (v. 5). This is the good work that God began in them and will continue to accomplish through them (v. 6). They are partners with Paul in his work for the gospel, and because of this he longs for them (vv. 7-8). So he will continue to pray for them (vv. 9-11).

So, what influence does the bigger idea have? First, it prepares the reader to understand that Paul is not merely greeting the Philippians. He is not wasting time. He is immediately into his purpose for writing.¹⁵

Dynamic number two states “the bigger idea will have as much influence as the particular passage will allow.” In Philippians, the majority of the passages will allow quite a lot. The pericopes in this letter are often about the gospel or about Christ who is the essence and content of the gospel. This close one-on-one association is not found in the rest of Paul’s writings.¹⁶

The biggest idea in the Bible is Christ.¹⁷ The Bible is theocentric in both testaments, but where is God more clearly seen than in the person and work of Christ?

¹⁵ Bockmuehl writes, “As in all Pauline letters, the address is now followed by an introductory section intended to set the tone and to highlight some of the essential themes of the letter.” Bockmuehl, *Epistle to the Philippians*, 57. This author would edit this statement to say it highlights “the essential theme of the letter.”

¹⁶ Paul is often addressing doctrinal problems (Galatian, Colossians, etc.) or pastoral problems (Corinthian correspondence). But in Philippians he begins and ends with the gospel.

¹⁷ Other terms are used to describe the grand theme, but they must be about Christ. “Through the centuries preachers like Calvin, Augustine, and Books, men who dared to tell others how to preach, have recognized a persistent theme that runs like a gold and scarlet thread through the Bible. Some call it ‘the knowledge of God,’ ‘the covenant,’ or ‘redemption’s story.’ The most persistent phrase is probably ‘the Word of God.’”

All sermons must point in some way to him. But in Philippians there is a unique status. The big ideas, the bigger idea, and the biggest idea stand more closely together. The big ideas state some aspect of the gospel or of Christ. The bigger idea is *devotion to the promotion of the gospel and devotion to the person of Christ are inseparable*. And the biggest idea is Christ himself. One does not need to travel far to get from one to another.

Sermon 2: Philippians 1:12-26

Exegetical Idea: Paul's difficulties in Rome have brought opportunities for the gospel to be proclaimed.

1. Paul's imprisonment has drawn attention to the gospel of Christ (1:12-13).
2. Paul's imprisonment has encouraged Christians to share the gospel (1:14-18).¹⁸
3. Paul believes that even his death will promote Christ (1:19-21).
4. Paul believes that his life after prison will present more opportunities for the gospel (1:22-26).

Homiletical Big Idea: The gospel is not chained by circumstances.

1. You can use your difficult times to direct people's attention to Christ (1:12-13).

Bruce L. Shelley, in *The Big Idea of Biblical Preaching*, ed. Keith Willhite and Scott M. Gibson (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 100.

¹⁸ Paul affirms that both groups—sincere believers and self-promoting believers—preach Christ, and he uses three different verbs to emphasize this: “speak the word” (*λαλεῖν*, 1:14), “preach Christ” (*κηρύσσονται*, 1:15), and “proclaim Christ” (*καταγγέλλονται*, 1:17-18).

2. When you stand up for the gospel, it will encourage other believers to do the same (1:14-18).
3. Even death should not silence your testimony for Christ (1:19-21).
4. The longer you live the more opportunities you will have to share Christ with others (1:22-26).

Bigger Idea Evaluated According to the Four Dynamics

Here is another pericope that agrees in substance with the bigger idea, and the *second dynamic* applies here also. There is one aspect in particular that the bigger idea can find in this passage and emphasize. It is this. Paul's devotion to the advancement of the gospel is ultimately based on his devotion to Christ himself. For Paul, "to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). This is the basis of Paul's motivation to share the gospel. This passage underscores the full statement of the bigger idea—devotion to the promotion of the gospel and devotion to the person of Christ are inseparable.¹⁹

¹⁹ "Paul's constant ambition is that in his body—that is, in whatever happens to him on the physical plane, whether life or death—the glory of Christ will be promoted. Should it be for the advancement of Christ's cause that Paul is sentenced to death and executed, then welcome death! But if it is for the advancement of Christ's cause that Paul should be acquitted and granted a further lease of mortal life, then welcome life!" Bruce, *Philippians*, 49.

Sermon 3: Philippians 1:27–2:18

Exegetical Idea: The Philippians are called to humble obedience for the sake of the gospel.

1. For the sake of the gospel the Philippians are called to unite and conduct themselves²⁰ in humble obedience even during a time of suffering (1:27–30).

The term “humble obedience” is not found in this large pericope (1:27–2:18). But both ideas are found in 2:8: Christ “humbled himself by becoming obedient unto death.”²¹ Here the terms are forged together. Humility expresses itself through obedience. This is how the believers at Philippi are to live in a manner worthy of the gospel (1:27). This humble obedience should not falter in the face of opposition or suffering (1:28–30).

2. For the sake of the gospel the Philippians are called to unite and conduct themselves in humble obedience even in the presence of church frictions (2:1–4).
3. The Philippians are called to have the attitude of humble obedience that was displayed in Christ (2:5–11).

²⁰ In Philippians 1:27 the NIV says “conduct yourselves,” but the Greek word πολιτεύεσθε may be more fully translated “live as citizens.” Certainly this had more meaning for the original recipients who lived in Philippi, a Roman colony (κολωνία, Acts 16:12). They understood citizenship to include involvement in the life and affairs of the city. They were not spectators; they were citizens. Then Paul connects citizenship not with Philippi but rather with living “in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” (NIV). What this means will be more fully seen as this section (1:27–2:18) unfolds. See Bruce, *Philippians*, 59, Additional Notes §8.

²¹ P. T. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 228.

4. The Philippians are called to work out their salvation by humble obedience (2:12-13).

The NIV translation²² rightly shows that working out their salvation is a continuation of the obedience they have already shown.

5. The humble service of the Philippians is to walk the walk (live as pure children of God) and to talk the talk (hold forth the word of life) (2:14-18).

“The Philippians’ obedience, the working out of their salvation, depended very largely on the maintenance of love and harmony within their community. If love and harmony were maintained, their witness in the pagan environment would be effective.”²³ If they do this, Paul will be satisfied that his stewardship was successful.

Homiletical Big Idea: You are called to humble obedience for the sake of the gospel.

1. For the sake of the gospel, conduct yourselves in humble obedience and in unity of spirit even during a time of suffering (1:27–2:4).

2. For the sake of the gospel unite yourselves in humble obedience even in the presence of church frictions (2:1-4).

3. Have the attitude of humble obedience that was displayed in Christ (2:5-11).

4. Work out your salvation by humble obedience (2:12-13).

²² Philippians 2:12, “Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed . . . continue to work out your salvation.”

²³ Bruce, *Philippians*, 84.

5. Your humble service is to walk the walk (live as pure children of God) and to talk the talk (hold forth the word of life) (2:14-18).

Bigger Idea Evaluated According to the Four Dynamics

This is a large section,²⁴ and it can be broken down into smaller parts. But the author wanted to show how the idea of humble obedience held them all together. The Philippians are called to live in a manner worthy of the gospel (1:27) and are to work out their salvation (2:12-13). These are different ways of expressing humble obedience. And at the core of this pericope is the example of Christ's humble obedience even unto death (2:5-11).

The fourth dynamic states *transitions between passages may receive a new clarity when they are considered in view of the bigger idea.* As the author analyzed possible transitions between the tradition sections of this pericope,²⁵ he began to see they were not needed in the light of the bigger idea. The bigger idea provides the context for obedience. Are the Philippians called to obey because it is morally right or because it will advance their holiness?²⁶ No, obedience is the way to live out the gospel and the best way to promote the gospel. Humble obedience is the way Jesus lived out his life, and believers are called to have the same way of thinking.

²⁴ This author identifies this section as Philippians 1:27–2:18. Moises Silva makes it even larger and identifies it as Philippians 1:27–2:30. He believes it is the “heart of the epistle.” See Moises Silva, *Philippians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 18-19. When Homer A. Kent, Jr. in the *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* outlines Philippians, he agrees with my division of 1:27-2:18 and entitles it “First Series of Exhortations.”

²⁵ Typically this passage would be divided into Philippians 1:27-30; 2:1-11; 2:12-18.

²⁶ Obedience is morally right and will advance holiness. But that is not the angle of Paul’s approach.

Sermon 4: Philippians 2:19-30

Exegetical Idea: Paul will send to Philippi two men who are examples of humble obedience and true gospel workers.

1. Timothy

- A. Timothy will be genuinely concerned for the Philippians (2:20).
- B. Timothy cares for what really matters to Christ (2:21).
- C. Timothy has helped Paul advance the gospel (2:22).

2. Epaphroditus

- A. Epaphroditus fulfilled his mission to minister to Paul in his time of need (2:25).
- B. Epaphroditus risked his life for the work of Christ (2:26-30).

Homiletical Big Idea: Obedience to the gospel means you care for others and for Christ more than for yourself

- 1. Gospel workers²⁷ should be genuinely concerned for other people (2:20).
- 2. Gospel workers should care for what really matters to Christ (2:21).
- 3. Gospel workers should help others advance the gospel (2:22).
- 4. Gospel workers should fulfill their mission to minister to others in their time of need (2:25).
- 5. Gospel workers should put the work of Christ ahead of their own lives (2:26-30).

²⁷ A gospel worker is a person who is in partnership with God working to promote the gospel.

Bigger Idea Evaluated According to the Four Dynamics

The third dynamic states, *Some passages may be seen in a new way as they are considered in the light of the bigger idea.* This can allow for a new cohesion to be seen throughout a book. Passages that seemed difficult to account for in relation to their immediate context may fit perfectly in the context of the bigger idea. This applies in this passage. Paul is not changing the subject from humble obedience for the sake of the gospel to now unveiling his apostolic travelogue. Rather, he is giving two examples of humble obedience with which the Philippians are well acquainted.

The bigger idea helps define why Paul sent these two workers. Both men are devoted to the promotion of the gospel and devoted to the person of Christ. They are examples of genuine workers for the gospel. The selection of the preaching text is influenced by the bigger idea. Instead of one sermon about Timothy and another about Epaphroditus, it is better to see how both men support one example of humble obedience in the work of the gospel.

Sermon 5: Philippians 3:1-16

Exegetical Idea: When Paul came to faith in Christ he saw that it was not all about Paul; it was all about Christ.

1. Before the gospel, Paul valued his standing, reputation, status, position, and prestige as a way to serve God (3:1-6).²⁸
2. When Paul encountered Christ, everything was changed, and he saw that faith in Christ was all that mattered (3:7-11).²⁹

²⁸ “When Paul claims that he could put up a better record ‘in the flesh’ than most people, if he still attached any importance to this sort of thing (which he does not), he means not only external ceremonies but a wide range of heritage, endowment, and achievement.” Bruce, *Philippians*, 107.

3. Paul says that he has not become all that Christ wants for him, but he is passionate to pursue it (3:12-14).
4. All mature³⁰ believers should follow Paul's example (3:15-16).

Homiletical Big Idea: It is not all about you; it is all about Christ.

1. Your standing, reputation, status, position, and prestige do not bring you any closer to God (3:1-6).
2. When you encounter Christ, everything will change, and you will find that faith in Christ is all that matters (3:7-11).
3. You have not become all that Christ wants for you, but forget what is behind and be passionate to pursue what Christ desires (3:12-14).
4. Your maturity will be seen in how you follow this pattern of living (3:15-16).

Bigger Idea Evaluated According to the Four Dynamics

The focus of the bigger idea in Philippians is on Christ and the gospel. Sometimes the gospel is the main subject and sometimes Christ. This is to be expected, for Christ is the content of the gospel. In this passage, Paul's personal encounter with Christ is salient. Everything that Paul had worked for all his life was thrown away. All things were

²⁹ In Philippians 3:8, “The five particles (ἀλλὰ μεν οὖν γε καὶ) before he proceeds shows the force and passion of Paul’s conviction.” See A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, vol. 4, *The Epistles of Paul* (Nashville: Broadman, 1931), 453.

³⁰ Paul uses τέλειοι (“mature”) in a different sense than its verbal form in verse 12, where he says he has not yet been made perfect (τετέλεσίωμαι). “It was a common literary phenomenon to repeat a word or its derivative in a different sense within the same context, and Paul does this often enough.” O’Brien, *Epistle to the Philippians*, 435.

transvalued³¹ by Christ. And in comparison, Paul is willing to forsake all of it in order to gain Christ.³² This passage is intensely personal.

The second dynamic states: *The bigger idea will have as much influence as the particular passage will allow.* The bigger idea in Philippians stresses “devotion.”³³ The word *devotion* goes beyond intellectual assent to a passionate, pure, unalloyed abandonment to Christ. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “Our hearts have room only for one all-embracing devotion, and we can only cleave to one Lord. Every competitor to that devotion must be hated.”³⁴

George Croly, in his hymn “Spirit of God Descend Upon My Heart,” captured this spirit of devotion when he wrote, “Teach me to love Thee as Thine angels love, One holy passion filling all my frame; The kindling of the heaven descended Dove, My heart an altar, and Thy love the flame.”³⁵

Sermon 6: Philippians 3:17–4:9

Exegetical Idea: Paul calls the Philippians to work together with God as citizens of heaven for the gospel.

³¹ “To evaluate by a new standard or principle, especially by one that varies from conventional standards.” *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), s.v.

³² To “gain Christ” and to “know Christ” are two ways to say the same thing. See Bruce, *Philippians*, 88.

³³ Devotion to the person of Christ and devotion to the promotion of the gospel are inseparable.

³⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 157.

³⁵ In 1854, when he was seventy-four years of age, George Croly desired a new hymnal for his congregation and eventually prepared and published his own *Psalms and Hymns for Public Worship*. This hymn is from that collection and was originally entitled “Holiness Desired.” It is Croly’s only surviving hymn from that collection. From the website “A Hymn and Its History” at http://www.biblestudycharts.com/HH_Spirit_of_God_Descend.html (accessed January 5, 2012).

1. Since the Philippians are citizens of heaven,³⁶ they should follow the gospel pattern that they have seen in Paul, Timothy, and Epaphroditus (3:17-21).³⁷
2. The Philippians, including Euodia and Syntyche,³⁸ should work as partners in the gospel (4:1-3).³⁹
3. The Philippians should be enthusiastic and dependent on prayer knowing that God is involved in their work (4:4-7).⁴⁰
4. The Philippians should meditate on those parts of their culture that would provide the gospel an avenue to advance (4:8-9).⁴¹

³⁶ The word for citizenship (*πολίτευμα*) is used only once in the New Testament (Philippians 3:20). Citizenship denotes *to live as a citizen, sharing in government, being involved in the whole process of ruling and enacting business*. It signifies a commitment to the greater good of the city (*πολις*), not as a spectator or a mere observer but as a full participant, one who has the right, privilege, and duty to be involved. Believers are to live their lives on earth as those who now have their citizenship (*πολίτευμα*) in heaven. “But the Philippians themselves lived in a city that was a Roman colony and so were perfectly familiar with the rights and dignity of Roman citizenship.” A. T. Robertson, *Paul’s Joy in Christ: Studies in Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1917), 103.

³⁷ In Philippians 3:20 γέρω makes sense if 3:18-19 is seen as parenthetical. So, picking up from 3:17: “take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you for (γέρω) our citizenship is in heaven.” That is, they modeled what heavenly citizenship would look like.

³⁸ “Paul says, ‘I beseech Euodia, and I beseech Syntyche’; his repetition of the verb ‘I beseech’ (Gk. Παρακάλω) with each of their names, as though he were personally addressing first one and then the other (“Please, Euodia; please Syntyche . . .”), is noteworthy.” Bruce *Philippians*, 139, Additional Notes §26.

³⁹ In Philippians 4:3, “It is most likely that Syzygus is a proper name and that ‘true’ is a reference to the meaning of ‘yoke-fellow.’ Live up to your name, a joiner together.” Robertson, *Paul’s Joy in Christ*, 229-30. Alternately, Bruce thinks it might be a reference to Luke for the “we” sections stop in Philippi (Acts 16:16) and do not continue until Paul again visits Philippi during his third missionary journey (Acts 20:6), implying that Luke was there for many years. Bruce, *Philippians*, 138.

⁴⁰ “The peace of God shall act as a garrison to the soul. . . . It is a military term. Hicks suggests the garrisoning of the towns by the Roman soldiers as a familiar sight. The successors of Alexander the Great made a feature of such garrisons in the towns of Asia Minor. Philippi was a Roman colony and a military outpost.” Robertson, *Paul’s Joy in Christ*, 238.

⁴¹ There is one long sentence in verses 8-9 with two commands: *think about such things and put these things into practice*.

Homiletical Big Idea: You should work together for the gospel knowing that God will support you.⁴²

1. As citizens of heaven, follow the gospel pattern that you have received (3:17-21).
2. Avoiding divisions, work together as partners in the gospel (4:1-3).
3. You should be enthusiastic and dependent on prayer knowing that God is involved in your work (4:4-7).
4. You should meditate on those parts of your culture that would provide the gospel an avenue to advance (4:8-9).

Bigger Idea Evaluated According to the Four Dynamics

The bigger idea has often been similar to the big idea in many passages in Philippians.⁴³ But this pericope is different. The bigger idea brings new content into points three and four. Point three describes God's involvement. The Philippians are to rejoice and not be anxious. Rather, they are to pray with thanksgiving and experience the peace of God (4:4-7). Is this offer of prayer and the resulting peace of God a general condition for all believers? The bigger idea would suggest that when believers are

⁴² The final portions of New Testament epistles are often seen as separate from the subject matter that preceded them. As an example, Fee describes Philippians 4:4-23 as "Concluding Matters" and admits that these concluding matters "have long puzzled scholars." Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 398. Similarly David Garland writes, "Paul's letter endings vary widely and lack any formal pattern, but he usually concludes with a battery of ethical imperatives." David E. Garland, *Philippians*, in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 12:252. In another typical example, Silva describes Philippians 4:2-23 as "Final Concerns." Silva, *Philippians*, 219. This author disagrees with this time-honored approach. In his division of pericopes he has assumed that Paul has stayed on task. His exhortations, which do come at the end of his letters, are part of the theme he has been developing.

⁴³ One could determine the big idea for the majority of the pericopes in Philippians without knowing the bigger idea. The bigger idea did not significantly alter how one would see the meaning of a passage. It might deepen it, but it did not change it.

engaged in the work of the gospel that this promise comes alive. It shows God's participation with those who promote the gospel.

Point four is also open to a new consideration. Without the bigger idea believers might think Paul was merely addressing attitudes or encouraging a personality tune-up. This is in fact how many preachers online and on television use this passage, especially Philippians 4:8. It goes something like this: Think positive thoughts and you will be happier, you will be healthier, you will feel better about yourself, and you will have more success.⁴⁴

But with the bigger idea as the context to understand this passage one comes to a very different conclusion. Each preaching session has emphasized Christ and the gospel as the unifying theme. How does one apply it to this passage? How does this passage relate to the gospel? Here is one possible understanding. The Philippians should meditate on those parts of their culture that would provide the gospel an avenue to advance (4:4-9).

The reason that the author suggests this unique understanding of the passage is as follows. First of all, the Philippians are not told to think only on biblical truths or on the attributes of God. Rather, they should think on *whatever* is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, and so on. This opens the scope of their meditation to consider everything around them. And then Paul adds that they are to keep putting into practice all they

⁴⁴ For example, Joel Osteen writes on Philippians 4:8, "God wants you to be blessed in every area of your life. The Bible says that Jesus came so that you and I could have life more abundantly, but it all starts in your thinking. That's why the scripture tells us very clearly what we should be thinking about—things that are noble, right, lovely, pure and praiseworthy. In other words, when a thought comes to your mind that you're never going to be successful, replace it by saying, 'Father, You said in Proverbs that if I would put You first, You would crown my efforts with success. You said in the Psalms that You surround me with favor like a shield. You said in Deuteronomy that Your blessings would chase me down and overtake me!' That's how you take every thought captive, one thought at a time! Today, refuse to allow any negative thoughts to take up space in your mind. Stay on the offensive and choose to think on the right things. Fill your heart and mind with the Word of God and open the door for His hand of blessing in every area of your life!" From *Today's Word with Joel Osteen*, October 25, 2010 [Devotional] posted on Monday, October 25, 07:54:31, 2010, by Vision.

<http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-religion/2613915/posts> - comment (accessed January 2, 2012).

learned from him and saw him doing (Philippians 4:9). Was this one of Paul's methods of evangelism?⁴⁵ Did he find aspects of secular culture that were noble or admirable as a way to approach a person and share the gospel? Was this the example he was talking about?

If one considers this pericope by itself, one may hesitate to reach such a conclusion. But when it is seen in the light of the bigger idea, another option opens up. The third dynamic—*some passages may be seen in a new way as they are considered in the light of the bigger idea*—applies here. This passage must be seen in the context of the promotion of the gospel and the person of Christ.

This passage is about how to affect the community believers live in with the gospel. They are to bring heaven down to earth. How can they do this? As they meditate on these things, ideas will present themselves. They will find ways to engage in the life of Philippi. This involvement will exhibit gospel opportunities. This involvement is a part of citizenship. They understood this as citizens of Philippi. Now, as citizens of heaven, they see it in a new dimension.

Sermon 7: Philippians 4:10-19⁴⁶

Exegetical Idea: As the Philippians support the gospel, God will support them.

1. The Philippians gave a gift to Paul, but Paul says it is God who meets all his needs (4:10-13).⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Paul exhibits this principle when he addressed the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in Athens in Acts 17:16-31. He refers to two secular poets in 17:28. The first quote (ἐν αὐτῷ γὰρ ζῶμεν καὶ κινούμεθα καὶ ἐσμέν for in Him we live and move and exist) is from Aratus of Soli in *Ta Phainomena* and the second quote (τοῦ γὰρ καὶ γένος ἐσμέν for we also are His offspring) is from Cleantes *Hymn to Zeus*. (Other literary quotes by Paul are in 1Cor. 15:32 where he quotes Menander and in Tit. 1:12 where he quotes Epimenides.) See A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*. Vol. 3 Acts (Nashville: Broadman, 1931), 289.

⁴⁶ At the close of this last sermon, read Paul's farewell (Philippians 4:20-23).

2. The Philippians' gift⁴⁸ to Paul is an offering to God, and he will remember it and reward them (4:14-19).

Homiletical Big Idea: As you support the gospel, God will support you.

1. When you give, it is God's grace through you to others (4:10-13).
2. Your gifts to advance the gospel are an offering to God, and he will remember them and reward you (4:14-19).

Bigger Idea Evaluated According to the Four Dynamics

The first dynamic was given as a warning. *The bigger idea should never obscure the big idea of the passage.* Let the big idea be the melody and the bigger idea the background harmony, present but not overwhelming. Too much emphasis on the bigger idea can make all the various passages say the same thing. This author has tried to avoid making this mistake in the Philippian passages. The big ideas stand on their own. The bigger idea is different from them, yet the relationship is always evident.

The Philippians sent a financial gift to support Paul. The apostle uses this contribution as a bookend to close this letter. The first bookend was in Philippians 1:5, where Paul writes that the Philippians have been his partners in the gospel from the

⁴⁷ “I have strength for all things in Him who keeps on pouring power into me.” Robertson, *Word Pictures*, 2:86 (a comment at Luke 6:19).

⁴⁸ In this pericope Paul frequently uses commercial language. For example, the Philippians alone (v. 16) shared with Paul in the matter of giving and receiving (δόσεως καὶ λήμψεως). “A recognized formula for money transactions, where one gives and another takes.” H. C. G. Moule, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, Thornapple Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 87. In verse 18 Paul says he has *received* everything in full. The verb ‘ἀπέχω’ “was frequently used in the papyri as a technical term for the receiving of a sum of money in full and giving a receipt for it (= ‘Paid in full’).” O’Brien, *Epistle to the Philippians*, 539-40.

beginning. Now, by their current actions,⁴⁹ they are showing that they are still his partners.

All 104 verses of this letter have been gospel-centered and Christ-centered. In passage after passage this theme has been building. Even this final passage that includes an anemic⁵⁰ “thank you” is enriched as it is view in the light of the bigger idea.

Conclusion

One of the dynamics for evaluating the influence of the bigger idea on the big idea is that *the bigger idea should never obscure the big idea of the passage*. This has not been a problem in Philippians. With no major problems to address, Paul has stayed close to the theme that fills his heart. It is all about the gospel and all about Christ. Every pericope mentions Christ, and the majority of pericopes also mention the gospel. Perhaps in no other book of the Bible will the bigger idea stand so closely to all of the big ideas.

In the next and last chapter the author describes the group who participated in this project. He also discusses the feedback forms they filled out and evaluates the data.

⁴⁹ Philippians 4:10, 14.

⁵⁰ Paul waits to mention this gift until the last chapter in the letter. He says he was not really in need for God meets all his needs. Nevertheless it was good for them to send a gift.

CHAPTER 5

FEEDBACK FORMS AND EVALUATION

In this chapter, the author addresses the matters pertaining to the small group, the feedback form, and an analysis of the feedback data

The Group

The Purpose of the Group

The people attending the study were from Middle Town Springs Community Church in Vermont. They gathered at a home on Wednesday evenings to study the book of Philippians. The small group attendance ranged from four to fourteen per night depending on winter weather and busy schedules over Thanksgiving.¹

It was explained to them that this was a different kind of study. They would be taught how to see Paul's correspondence from the Philippians' viewpoint. They would also be shown how to understand each section under the light of the theme² of Philippians.³

¹ The small group attendance ranged from four to fourteen per night during the course of the eight-week study. Adding the weekly attendance provides the total of N=sixty-nine.

² Since these were laypersons, the word *theme* was used rather than "bigger idea."

³ These desired outcomes of instruction were stated and reviewed at the beginning of each lesson. To emphasize this, a big idea outline of Philippians was handed out with the bigger idea of Philippians at the top. See Appendix 1.

Demographics

The ages ranged from mid-twenties to early seventies. The average age of attendees was forty-five to fifty-five. The mix of male and female was even.

The Philippian Mindset

Each week the teacher instructed the attendees to go back in time, that is, to think what it was like to be the Christians at Philippi.⁴ Their mentor and friend, Paul, was in a Roman prison. They lived in a Roman colony. The New Testament had not been gathered together. Because they were concerned for Paul they had sent Epaphroditus to help him. Now, they have received a letter from Paul. It is filled with encouragement.

This was a difficult orientation to ask the group to attune to. Good actors can step into the part they are playing, although to do so requires strong natural gifts and often in-depth training. But the attendees in the small group did not seem to be daunted. Whenever they were verbally questioned about this, they said they understood what the instructor was asking and that they were doing fine.

Group Dynamics

Although the instructor encouraged the group to have an attitude of disinterested honesty, he could see they wanted to please the one conducting the survey. They wanted to support him in this study. Therefore, the instructor often told them that he wanted them to be candid and that however they answered on the feedback form it would not help or hurt his grade. He simply needed information from them.

⁴ See Appendix 3 for example of this instruction.

Teaching Aids

The instructor used a black foam poster board (20x30x1/4 inches).⁵ On the top was a smaller white foam poster board (9x12x1/4 inches) with the bigger idea of Philippians stated. On the bottom of the board was a matching white foam poster board with the big idea for the passage being studied that night.⁶

At the end of the first session the instructor distributed a big idea outline of the book of Philippians so that participants could see what would be covered each week. The bigger idea was written at the top.

The Feedback Form

Basic Information

The feedback mechanism⁷ consisted of one sheet. After each study of approximately forty-five minutes, the group had five to ten minutes to hear about the feedback mechanism and to fill it out.

In the introductory session the author covered Acts 16⁸ and presented an overview of Philippians to establish the theme⁹ of the epistle. A feedback form specific to this lesson was distributed. The reason for this feedback was explained. The forms were gathered before the group dismissed.

⁵ See Appendix 2.

⁶ These boards were purchased from Staples office-supply store pre-sized and ready to go. The instructor attached the white boards on the black board with Velcro. The text was printed in landscape view with the largest size that would fit and taped onto the white boards. The bigger idea stayed the same each week, but the big idea changed each week as the group studied another passage.

⁷ For examples of the feedback forms see Appendix 4.

⁸ Acts 16 describes the entry of the gospel into Europe as Paul and his team come to Philippi.

⁹ For the sake of clarity in the survey, the instructor used the term “the theme of the epistle” rather than “the bigger idea,” as is used in this thesis.

Quantitative Questions

The quantitative questions for sessions 2 through 8¹⁰ were always the same. The first question determined how well the study group adopted the mindset and historical thinking of the Philippians Christians. The second question measured the influence of the bigger idea on the big ideas throughout the epistle.

The simplest form of the Likert¹¹ scale was used, which gave room only for a negative or positive answer. This showed how participants rated the importance of the mindset of the Philippians for understanding the epistle. It also indicated how the influence of the bigger idea could vary on different passages.

In session 2 a control question was included to help evaluate the reliability of the feedback. It restated the second question using other words. Of the fourteen feedback forms, three people answered differently on the same question repeated with different wording. This means that they did not always understand what the question was asking. If this study is done again, more control questions would be helpful to ascertain the accuracy of the answers.

Qualitative Questions

In the last session the group was asked for verbal responses to ascertain what new understanding or behaviors they had learned. Here are the questions.

1. How do you view the letter to the Philippians differently?
2. What new avenues have you seen to promote the gospel?

¹⁰ These seven sessions were the actual study of the book of Philippians.

¹¹ A typical Likert scale would have ascending and descending values:

1 strongly agree	2 agree	3 disagree	4 strongly disagree
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3. Are you more motivated to promote the gospel?

4. What is Paul's motivation to share the gospel?

The verbal responses affirmed that people were seeing Paul's letter to the Philippians in a new way. They were motivated to promote the gospel and were thinking about new ways to do so.

On the feedback form for the final session, there were also four qualitative questions that were used to get an overall impression on how the eight-week study had affected people. These questions were:

1. How has the theme¹² of the epistle (*Devotion to the person of Christ and devotion to the promotion of the gospel*) changed how you see the book of Philippians?

Several responses indicated that understanding the theme concentrated respondents' attention on how the different passages focused on Christ and the gospel. Another said it made Paul's words "clearer and more understandable." An additional respondent wrote, "I now get the overall picture of the message Paul is making."

2. How has this study made you more aware of the gospel?

Some of the responses were, "It brought it to life. It has reminded me that in every corner of the word, the gospel can be found and applied," and "the gospel intersects every aspect of my life."

3. How has this study changed you? (How have you applied it?)

One person said the way the Philippians were devoted to Christ and the gospel was a strong example of how a church should function. Another said it made the gospel more personal and therefore easier to apply. One response was, "I realized that I need to put the gospel more in the everyday issues of my life." One individual wrote, "It has

¹² The term "theme" rather than "bigger idea" was used when addressing this group of lay persons.

made me more aware of being a living example and looking at others through the eyes of Christ—with his love for them and desire for them to be saved.”

4. What new ideas do you have for sharing the gospel?

The explanation of Philippians 4:8-9 seemed to strike a chord with everyone. This was not a group of preachers and evangelists.¹³ But people wanted to find bridges into their community to share the gospel. One wrote, “This isn’t a new idea, but I think in today’s world many people are lonely and need a kind word and a relationship with a friend which can lead to learning of Christ.” Another shared a testimony concerning her neighbor who did not want to hear anything about Jesus. She kept building a friendship with the neighbor, and now that whole family is in church. One individual said, “I want to be involved in the small things within my community. I am now seeing that most social involvement can have a gospel opportunity.” Another wrote that he or she would become involved in a food ministry for the needy. The participants agreed that by living the message of the gospel, the time would come when they could speak the message.

These written questions were comparable to the verbal questions that were used at the beginning of the session. The similarity of answers showed that people understood the material and it had changed some of their behaviors.

¹³ There was one exception. Our group met at the house of the former pastor of Middle Town Springs Community Church, and he and his wife attended.

Analysis of the Feedback Data

Session 1 (Acts 16 and the Theme of Philippians)

The attendees were asked if the context of the book of Acts helped them understand more about the Christians at Philippi. There were three possible responses. Four people said it helped them *somewhat*. Five people said it helped *a lot*. None said that it *didn't help*. As the study continued throughout the weeks, many people verbalized that understanding more about Philippi and what happened in Acts was profitable.

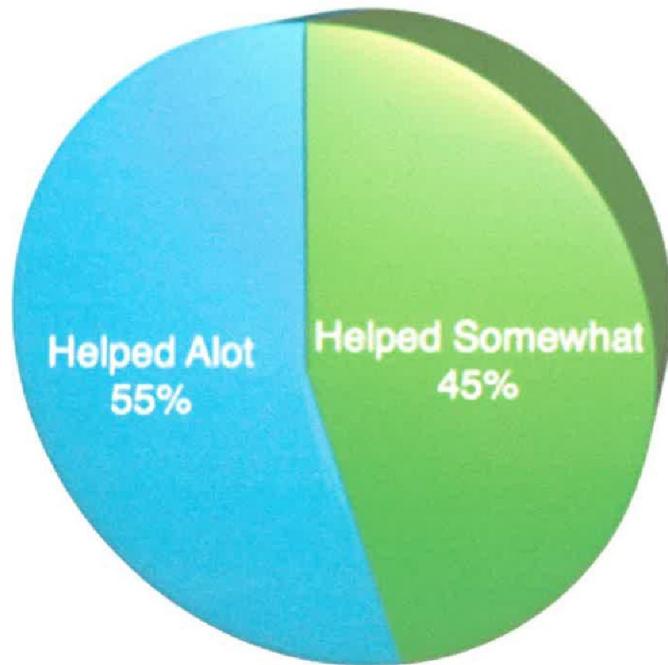


Figure 5.1 The Benefit of the Book of Acts

The second statement was: I understand and agree with the theme¹⁴ of Philippians as presented. (*Devotion to the person of Christ and devotion to the promotion of the gospel are inseparable.*) One person said that this may be correct. Eight persons said they were convinced this was the theme. No one selected the option stating that they disagreed with this theme.

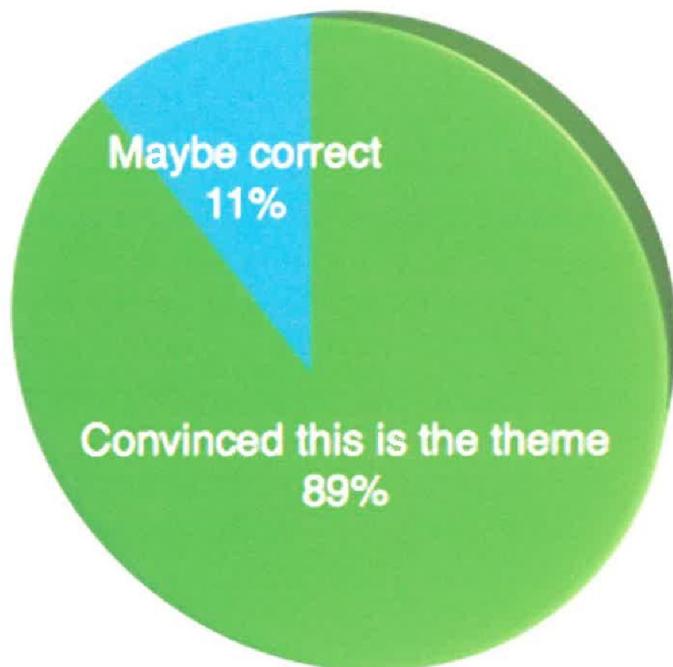


Figure 5.2 The Initial Agreement of the Participants with the Theme of Philippians.

¹⁴ Since this was a group of lay persons, the word “theme” is used rather than “bigger idea.”

The third statement was: I understand that in this Bible study, we are asked to think like the Philippians who did not have the New Testament available to them.¹⁵ Five people said they would try to do this. Four people were confident that they could do this. No one selected the option “this is confusing.”

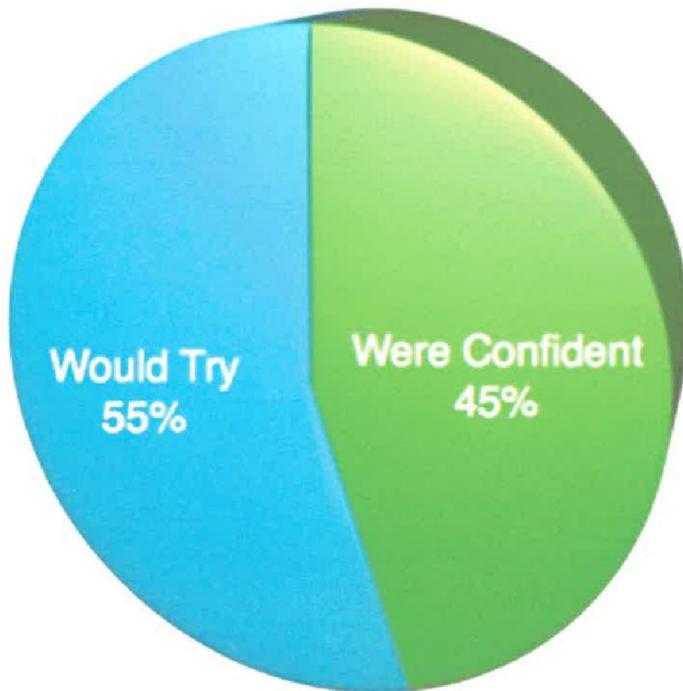


Figure 5.3 The Initial Agreement to Adopt the Mindset of the Philippians.

But as the study advanced, all came to have this perspective. There was not a single negative response to this to this issue in sessions 2 through 8.

¹⁵ In this session people were taught in some detail the position of the Philippians. Therefore the statement on the feedback form was a summary statement.

Sessions 2 through 8—First Inquiry on the Feedback Form

Once the group began session 2, we were in the book of Philippians, and each session had the same two statements. The first statement was: Putting myself in the Philippians mindset helped me see the content of (the passage under study) differently. Respondents had these options:

- Didn't help
- Helped somewhat
- Helped a lot

Results of the first statement

Session 2: Seven people said it helped somewhat, and seven people said it helped a lot. No one said it did not help.

Session 3: Six people said it helped somewhat, and eight people said it helped a lot. No one said it did not help.

Session 4: Three people said it helped somewhat, and six people said it helped a lot. No one said it did not help.

Session 5: Two¹⁶ people said it helped somewhat, and two people said it helped a lot. No one said it did not help.

Session 6: Three people said it helped somewhat, and two people said it helped a lot. No one said it did not help.

Session 7: One person said it helped somewhat, and four people said it helped a lot. No one said it did not help.

¹⁶ The attendance over eight weeks varied greatly, especially as Thanksgiving and the holiday season approached.

Session 8: Three people said it helped somewhat, and four people said it helped a lot. No one said it did not help.

All the responses were positive. Some were in the median range (twenty-five selected *helped somewhat*, and some were in the high range (thirty-one selected *helped a lot*). This author thinks that people enjoyed knowing the historical context of the Philippians. It made the letter more personal, and they were more confident in their understanding of the passages and how to apply them.

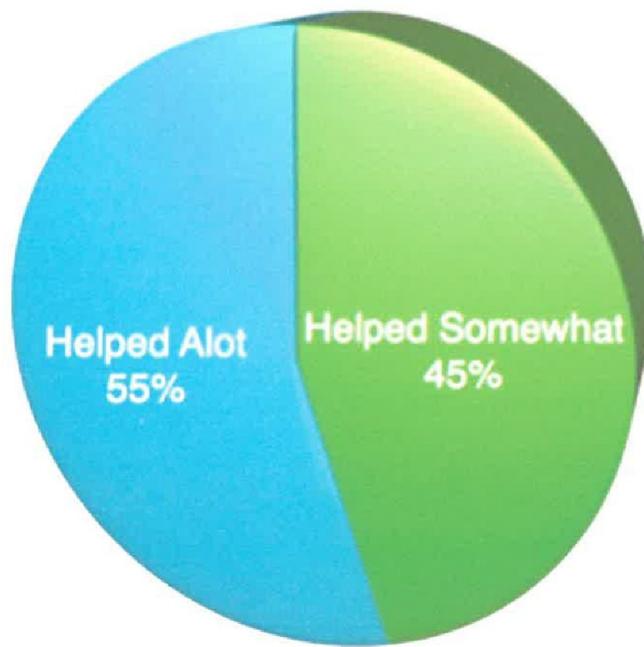


Figure 5.4 The Benefit of Seeing the Letter from the Philippians' Mindset.

Sessions 2 through 8—Second Inquiry on the Feedback Form

The participants could choose either of the following options:

- The theme of the epistle did **not** influence my understanding of the passage we studied tonight.
- The theme of the epistle highlighted or made the passage we studied tonight stand out more.

Results of the second statement

Session 2: Two people said the theme did not influence their understanding of Philippians 1:3-11. Twelve people said it did.

Session 3: All fourteen attendees said the theme influenced their understanding of Philippians 1:12-26.

Session 4: All nine attendees said the theme influenced their understanding of Philippians 1:27-2:18.

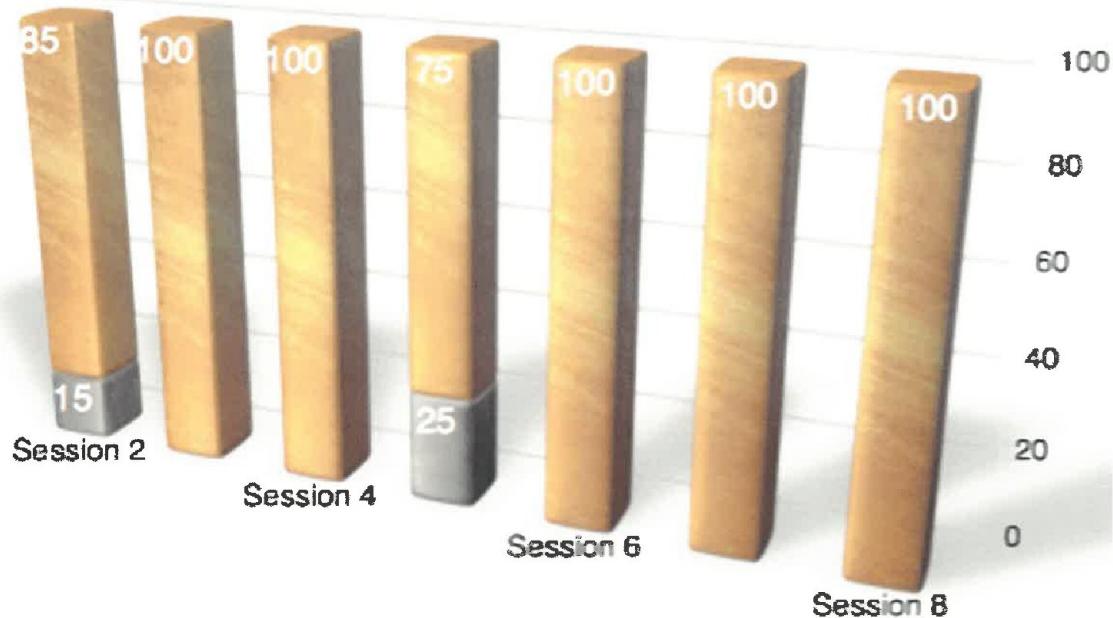
Session 5: One person said the theme did not influence his or her understanding of Philippians 2:19-30. Three people said it did.

Session 6: All four attendees said the theme influenced their understanding of Philippians 3:1-16.¹⁷

Session 7: All five attendees said the theme influenced their understanding of Philippians 3:17-4:9.

Session 8: All seven attendees said the theme influenced their understanding of Philippians 4:10-19.

¹⁷ One evaluation form did not have a response to this statement.



Key: Tan = the % of responses saying the theme had significant influence

Gray = the % of responses saying the theme had no influence

Figure 5.5 The Influence of the Theme

As is clearly evident, the benefit of understanding the theme or bigger idea of a book aided their understanding of the seven pericopes we studied. I had expected more variation. The bigger idea in Philippians and the various big ideas were often similar.¹⁸ I thought that the effect of the bigger idea in these cases would be less.

I had anticipated that when the bigger idea threw a passage¹⁹ into new light that the influence would be rated the greatest. But basically, the group answered that the bigger idea had an impact on every passage. In every instance the bigger idea had significant influence in how they understood a passage.

¹⁸ I would include in this group all the pericopes except 3:17-4:9. The gospel is evident in these passages and relates easily to the bigger idea.

¹⁹ Philippians 3:17-4:9.

Overall, out of the sixty-nine forms that attendees filled out, only eight of these forms contained any negative answers. The author believes that this is partially due to the group dynamic that was mentioned before: they wanted to support the author in this project. But the outcome is beyond dispute. Limiting their contextual understanding to that of the Philippian believers was highly beneficial. It served to focus their thoughts and discussion in the small group. It helped them see the big idea. Correspondingly, understanding the bigger idea helped them understand the big ideas, helped connect the passages, and gave new insight into some passages.

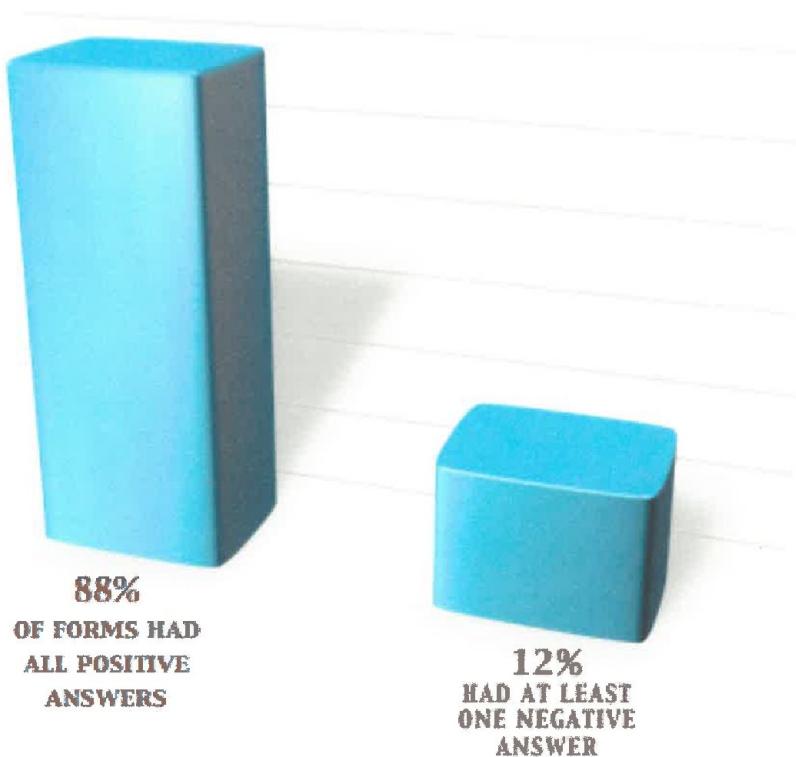


Figure 5.6 Positive and Negative Answers in Feedback Forms

New Behaviors That Show the Goals Were Understood and Implemented

Behavior Changes

The qualitative responses and verbal responses showed that people had understood the learning objectives and had made changes in their behavior. These seem to address devotion to the promotion of the gospel:

1. They could distinguish innovative ways to present the gospel.
2. They could identify the people they wanted to encourage in the gospel.
3. They could specify a list of people to pray for salvation.
4. They were beginning to construct a grace-centered approach that applies the reality of the gospel to all aspects of life.

Heart Changes

An internal heart attitude is difficult to directly ascertain. But maybe the bigger idea in Philippians can help: *Devotion to the promotion of the gospel and devotion to the person of Christ are inseparable.* Participants have new behaviors that show a devotion to the promotion of the gospel. What is this based upon? A charitable evaluation would say their behaviors are based on a new devotion to Christ.

Evaluation

Future Projects

What kind of future projects could grow out of the thesis? A larger sample group studying Philippians would present more established data. The attendance in this small group was variable. A larger group would yield data that is more statistically verifiable. A larger group, being more impersonal, may avoid the desire to answer all inquiries in a positive manner.

A study of another book of the Bible showing the bigger idea's influence on the big ideas would give a broader understanding of the dynamic between these two concepts. Some aspects of the Philippian letter may be unique. Until other studies are done, one would not know this.

The author has listed four dynamics that describe and limit the influence a bigger idea can have on a big idea. There are probably more. It would be helpful if someone investigated this and published the findings.

How This Study Could Have Been Improved

This particular study could have been improved if homework assignments had been given. Some assignments would challenge how people could think about the gospel in some new ways. Other assignments would ask them apply what they were learning in some practical way and report back to the group. These kinds of things went on in an informal manner, but targeted homework would have been beneficial and everyone all would have benefited from attendees' creative efforts.

Implications for Ministry

There are some noteworthy implications for ministry in general. To discover a big idea requires intense thinking about a passage. This is always beneficial. To discover the bigger idea in a book of the Bible, the same kind of thinking is needed. Only, it will take more time because more material must be absorbed. One could wish that more people trained in the big idea approach to preaching also wrote commentaries and applied their discipline to discovering the bigger idea. Pastors' time is often not their own. They may only have the time to find a big idea in a passage. To find the bigger idea of some of the larger books of the Bible may seem daunting. If a commentary put forth the bigger idea, readers would still need to vet²⁰ it to see if they agree, but it might save a lot of time.

Any big idea can only benefit by being married to the bigger idea of the book in which it is found. Therefore long-term sermon planning is absolutely necessary in order to walk around in a book long enough to welcome it as a friend. For longer books of the Bible, this may take one or two years of unrushed observation and note taking. It would be worth it.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the big idea approach to preaching radically changed this author, who had not read anything by Haddon Robinson or the preaching faculty at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary or their like-minded friends until he began reading for his first cohort. Thereupon he embarked on a fantastic journey that swept him up ever since he entered the Doctor of Ministry program entitled "The Preacher and the Message."

²⁰ They would have to make a careful and critical examination to see if the bigger idea accounted for all the sub-themes in the book. If it does not, the bigger idea has not yet been discovered. The advantage of a commentary suggesting a bigger idea is that it gives a person a place to start.

Although he at that time had been a pastor and a preacher for more than twenty years, he never realized that he knew so little about preaching! But he had stepped under a veritable waterfall of highly usable information that still has fresh benefits for him.

The latest addition to this journey is a new understanding of the bigger idea. It promises to have its own benefits in the years to come.

APPENDIX 1

PHILIPPIANS BIG IDEA OUTLINE

One holy passion—the theme of the epistle: Devotion to the *person* of Christ and devotion to the *promotion* of the gospel are inseparable. Paul cannot see one without seeing the other.

Greeting (1:1-2)

I. This is the work of God: that you become his partners in the gospel (1:3-11).

- A. This gospel partnership brings joy into the Christian life (1:3-5).
- B. This gospel partnership shows that God is at work in you and will continue his good work (1:6).
- C. This gospel partnership deepens fellowship between believers (1:7-8).
- D. This gospel partnership deepens your Christian life and brings glory to God (1:9-11).

II. The gospel is not chained by circumstances (1:12-26).

- 1. You can use your difficult times to direct people's attention to Christ (1:12-13).
- 2. When you stand up for the gospel, it will encourage other believers to do the same (1:14-18).
- 3. Even death should not silence your testimony for Christ (1:19-21).
- 4. The longer you live the more opportunities you will have to share Christ with others (1:22-26).

III. You are called to humble obedience for the sake of the gospel (1:27-2:18).

1. For the sake of the gospel, conduct yourselves in humble obedience and in unity of spirit even during a time of suffering (1:27–2:4).
2. Have the attitude of humble obedience that was displayed in Christ (2:5-11).
3. Work out your salvation by humble obedience (2:12-13).
4. Your humble service is to walk the walk (live as pure children of God) and to talk the talk (hold forth the word of life) (2:14-18).

IV. To promote the gospel, you must care for others and for Christ more than for yourself (2:19-30).

1. Gospel workers should be genuinely concerned for other people (2:20).
2. Gospel workers should care for what really matters to Christ (2:21).
3. Gospel workers should help others advance the gospel (2:22).
4. Gospel workers should fulfill their mission to minister to others in their time of need (2:25).
5. Gospel workers should put the work of Christ ahead of their own lives (2:26-30).

V. It is not all about you; it is all about Christ (3:1-16).

1. Your standing, reputation, status, position, and prestige do not bring you any closer to God (3:1-6).

2. When you encounter Christ, everything will change, and you will find that faith in Christ is all that matters (3:7-11).
3. You have not become all that Christ wants for you, but forget what is behind and be passionate to pursue what Christ desires (3:12-14).
4. All believers should follow this same example (3:15-16).

VI. You should work for the gospel knowing that God will support you (3:17–4:9).

1. As citizens of heaven, follow the gospel pattern that you have received (3:17-21).
2. Avoiding divisions, work together as partners in the gospel (4:1-3).
3. You should be enthusiastic and dependent on prayer knowing that God is involved in your work (4:4-7).
4. You should meditate on those parts of your culture that would provide the gospel an avenue to advance (4:8-9).

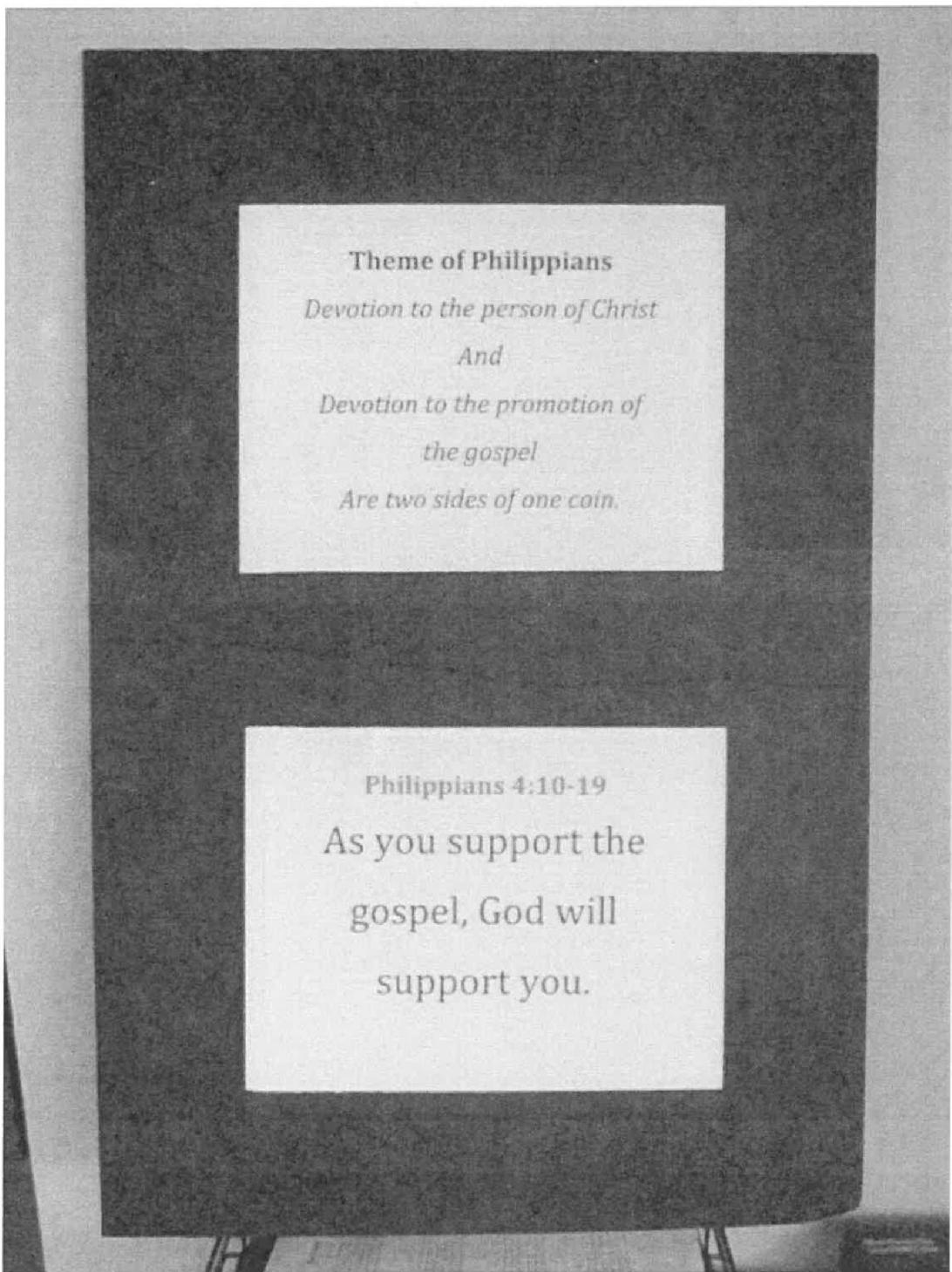
VII. As you support the gospel, God will support you (4:10-19).

1. When you give, it is God's grace through you to others (4:10-13).
2. Your gifts to advance the gospel are an offering to God, and he will remember them and reward you (4:14-19).

Farewell (4:21-23)

APPENDIX 2

POSTER



Theme of Philippians

Devotion to the person of Christ

And

*Devotion to the promotion of
the gospel*

Are two sides of one coin.

Philippians 4:10-19

As you support the
gospel, God will
support you.

APPENDIX 3

HOW TO THINK LIKE THE PHILIPPIANS

Using any of these snapshots will help your participants step into the mindset of the Philippians.

Uniqueness of the Christians at Philippi

- Gospel introduced into Europe.
- No other church supported Paul's mission as this church did.
- They were Paul's partners in the gospel.
- No major problems at this church. Compare with other churches:

Paul addressed lifestyle problems at Corinth.

Paul addressed doctrinal problems with the Galatians.

- In Philippians we find Paul undistracted by problems in a church.
- It is undiluted, quintessential Paul. It is the heart of Paul revealed.
- It is one holy passion—devotion to Christ and devotion to the gospel.

Timeline

- Paul had brought the gospel to them in Acts 16 (AD 51).
- He will not be back for about seven years¹ (Acts 20).
- In the meantime, Luke might have been with them. The “we” travel passages² begin at Acts 16:10-12 but stop at Acts 16:40 (in Philippi). They pick up again at Acts 20:6 when Paul and company are back in Philippi and leave once again.

¹ F. F. Bruce, *Philippians: A Good News Commentary*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), xviii.

- Four more years have passed, and Paul is in prison in Rome (end of Acts; AD 62).
- The Philippians send Epaphroditus to bring financial support and help for Paul.

Paul's Letter to the Philippians

- Have you ever been waiting to hear from someone you love who is in a crisis?
- How did the Philippians receive Paul's communication? As a personal letter or a book of the Bible?
- The Philippians had just one letter from Paul.
- So they would give special attention to it.
- The New Testament had not been gathered—they had just one letter from Paul with 104 verses.

Original Context

- Remind them that in this study they are adopting the context of the original Philippians.
- They will not use other letters from Paul or other parts of the New Testament.
- They will not compare any part of Philippians with other writings in the New Testament.
- They will compare sections/paragraphs of Philippians with its larger theme.

² For readers who are unfamiliar with the “we” travel passages, see F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (reprint ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 2-3.

Update on Paul's Circumstances

- Remember—you are the Philippian church.
- You saw Paul put in jail when he first came to Philippi (Acts 16).
- He is now in jail in Rome (Acts 28). He has written this letter from prison.
- It has been about eleven years since Paul first brought the gospel to Philippi.

APPENDIX 4

FEEDBACK FORMS

First Session: Acts 16 and Discovering the Theme in Philippians

Read the statement and check the box that describes your response.

1. The context of the book of Acts helped me understand something about the Christians at Philippi.

Didn't help Helped somewhat Helped a lot

2. I understand and agree with the theme of Philippians as presented.

(Devotion to the person of Christ and devotion to the promotion of the gospel are inseparable.)

I disagree It may be correct I am convinced

3. I understand that in this Bible study, we are asked to think like the Philippians, who did not have the New Testament available to them.

This is confusing I guess I can try I can do this

The feedback forms for sessions two through eight all deal with the book of Philippians. The data that is asked for is the same for each session; only the passage under consideration is different. So this form is representative of all the

sessions. The only difference in this session is a control question was added. It repeats the information asked for in the second statement only in a different way.

Second Session: Philippians 1:3-11

Read the statement and check the box that describes your response.

1. Putting myself in the Philippians mindset helped me see the content of 1:3-11 differently.

Didn't help Helped somewhat Helped a lot

2. The theme of the epistle (*Devotion to the person of Christ and devotion to the promotion of the gospel are inseparable*) made the message in 1:3-11 even more emphatic.

The theme did not influence my understanding of 1:3-11. The theme highlighted or made the passage (1:3-11) stand out more.

3. How important is context? That is, how important is understanding the individual passage (1:3-11) in the light of the theme of the epistle?

Not important—It does not make a significant difference. Very important—It makes a real difference.

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